

**Off Duty**

**Anti-Broadcast**

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# Summary

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## Description:

One year has passed. Life must continue in the wake of Zidane's absence. Some things are closer than they think. And nothing will ever be easy again.

# Chapter One

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## Off Duty

*A huge thank you to Bart415 for helping me develop this story!*

## Chapter One

The General of Alexandria was exhausted. The buckling gondola crossed the river and the mighty Alexandrian Castle loomed over her. She hadn't slept much in the past week and a half. It was hard to when the sparse inn beds were made of hay and the rest of the time it was the spent on the cold rigid ground under the stars. Beatrix dipped her head, watching the river ripple against the side of the small boat. Her chestnut brown hair had lost its curls and it fell flat and long around her shoulders, framing her face. Disappointment hung heavily in her chest as the familiar mossy and sloped courtyard stairs came into view. Even after such a long and tiring journey, the fourth one she had made in eleven months time, the worst part had yet to come. The soldier who had steered her across saluted faithfully as she stepped back onto true familiar territory. Nearly twelve days away, it had been too long.

Beatrix reached for her duffel bag, slinging it against her back. She let out a long huff and a deep inhale, smelling the nostalgic honeysuckles that blossomed in the garden. As she began up the steps, the other soldiers also struck a salute. Beatrix hoped she didn't look too rough. But she did indeed feel rough. She tried brushing her hair from her face and straightened her back upon noticing her hunching. As she stepped on the path leading towards the Castle, she couldn't help but feel a rapid anxiety overcome her. She didn't want to do what she was about to. She could only imagine the countless number of faces awaiting her arrival in the Deliberation Room. Beatrix tried piecing it together in her mind, but she knew her idea would only evoke refusals. She blinked rapidly, noticing something relatively shiny glimmering from the doors of the Castle. She furrowed her brow to see what it was, amazed by what she realized.

It was Captain Adelbert Steiner. And it seemed his armor had been given a fresh polish, which Steiner was usually passive about. He looked sharp and spiffy, Beatrix decided, as she continued to approach him. A smile was beginning to tug at her achy muscles. In the aftermath of returning to Alexandria, to rebuilding it, and watching Garnet

prosper on the throne, General Beatrix and Captain Steiner had captured something tender. It had been eleven months since the Day of Grief and together, Beatrix and Steiner had built a patient love; a forgiving love. Still dedicated to their roles in aiding the growth and healing of Alexandria, they did so now together, as a more cohesive unit. The past eleven months had been painfully difficult, but they had managed to cultivate something beautiful of it. Steiner came to meet Beatrix half way on the path and he tenderly wrapped his arms around her shoulder. After they shared the embrace, he took his bag from her, pressing a hand to her shoulder to guide her into the cool and quiet Castle. Glimmering in all its marble beauty, the Alexandrian Castle never changed with its dark century old paintings adorning the walls and statues of martyrs and past heroes crowding the perimeter. There wasn't a soul to be seen as the couple found themselves alone. Beatrix gazed up towards the surrounding balconies, but nobody was there.

“No one is aware of my arrival?” Beatrix looked to Steiner. Her flat hair and colorless face, devoid of any powder or rouge, stuck out at Steiner. He knew she was utterly exhausted, but unfortunately, she



could not rest yet. Steiner only shook his head. “Her Majesty, where is she?”

“The Deliberation Room,” Steiner told her, though she already knew. ‘She has been for the past four days... awaiting, perhaps, an early arrival.’ Beatrix was quiet and looked towards the stairs. She didn’t know where she’d muster the energy to stumble up them. And she was exasperated to know she’d have to go back down them. All Beatrix wanted to do was curl up in her familiar bed and put her head under a pillow. Only for a little while. Her body screamed from over exertion and her mind was just as mentally tired. The past eleven months of the General’s life had been subject to heavy travel and pressured thinking. The Captain hadn’t had it so easy, either, responding and supporting Queen Garnet as first in command. Her transition into power hadn’t been completely seamless. And restoring prosperity and faith to City of Alexandria certainly was no overnight feat. “I suppose it’s safe to assume your timely return on the twelfth days means...” He stopped when he saw her dark moody eyes. Eventually she cast her eyes down.

“I’ve turned every stone over on the entire continent. I’ve sifted through every grain of sand on the beaches...” Beatrix’s voice was raspy and tired.

“I’ve sailed every sea and navigated each windy river. I’ve combed marshlands and climbed into caves... I’ve looked everywhere, Steiner.”

He pursed his lips, slumping Beatrix’s bag against the base of the stairs. His armor rattled as he tilted his helmet backwards. “What are you thinking?”

Beatrix could almost taste the copper twang of blood as she bit down on her lip. Saying it was hard enough. But she didn’t want to have to say it twice. The very thought made her fill with shame. It burned her tongue and made bile stew in her throat. Beatrix felt like the words made her a failure. A betrayer. Like she wasn’t doing everything she could. Beatrix realized her fists were clenched and she had to take a deep breath to relax. “I... I believe this was my final search, Steiner. My team and I have done everything we can. Anymore work on this mission will be futile and a waste of resources. I... I have to call it off.”

Steiner nodded and absorbed her words. “So... that means...”

“Yes,” Beatrix’s voice almost faltered at the idea. Silence filled the front foyer. Distantly, the birds chirped beyond the window. Beatrix again tilted her head down, guilt washing over her. Her insides

constricted at the thought of her next task. “Who is in the company of Her Majesty?”

“It would be easier to tell you who isn’t.”

“Even Tantalus?” Beatrix looked through the curtain of her hair at Steiner.

“Blank, Marcus, and Cinna,” Steiner said. “Everyone was feeling hopeful you’d return with more conclusive information.”

Beatrix raked her hair from her face and walked a few paces, hugging herself. “That’s far too large of an audience, Steiner. I couldn’t possibly fathom walking into that room and saying what I feel I have to. I cannot keep my thoughts from Her Majesty, however. I cannot keep lifting her hopes when I leave, only to return and crush any spirits she may have. It’s not fair, Steiner. It’s not fair to any of us.”

“You are speaking from your heart,” Steiner assured her. “It is in everyone’s best interest to begin the phase of... of acceptance.” He tilted his head down and Beatrix turned towards him.

“Steiner?” Her face seemed hurt.

“It’s okay...” Steiner shook his head. “I’m fine. We all will be.”

Beatrix approached him, reaching her hand out to touch his arm. “This is the last thing I wanted, Steiner. I did not want to have to come to this conclusion. But... there is nothing tangible for me to go off of. Not a single boot track. No weapons. No articles of clothes. There is no trace of him.”

“I know you did everything you could,” Steiner told her.

“I only hope the other’s believe so as well.”

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The Deliberation Room was large and spacious. The chilly early spring light spilled into the room, making the polished floors glow and the gold framing glisten. The long chestnut brown table was occupied with several bodies. Tea pots, cups, and saucers were scattered about and the faint clanking of silver spoons to ramekins rang out as people helped themselves to sugar, honey, and cream. At the head of the table sat the Queen of Alexandria. The past eleven months had been well to Garnet. Her onyx hair tumbled down her back again, thick and full. Her brown eyes, the color of coffee, were vibrant and engaged. As Queen, she often opted for frilly button-up shirts with elaborate cuffs and

collars, accented by orange skirts and red leather boots. She delicately stirred her tea, watching the honey swirl about but never truly marry with her tea. She was rapidly approaching her seventeenth birthday, but the day did little to evoke cheer from her. Sat to her left was seven year old Lady Eiko of Lindblum. Having been taken in by the Lindblum Castle had rapidly transformed the fiery and free-spirited Daughter of Madain Sari. Long past were her days of vibrant and mismatching coveralls and sweaters. Now, she was only found in tulles, silks, and velvets. Her purple hair had been trained to grow out and her bangs had been cut to part across her forehead, exposing her bright eyes and complexion. Across from the chatty Lady sat Vivi, dubbed a Knight by Captain Steiner himself. Time hadn't made much a difference on Vivi and he still delighted the group of friends with his charismatic and patient nature. Further down the table sat Freya, who had grown wise and humble with time. Always dedicated to be true to herself, the past eleven months had sent her on a journey of learning to accept who she was and reclaim and rebuild what was dear to her. As Burmecia prospered, so did the Dragoon, who now dressed in royal blue coats and hats, a sign of dignity and great respect in her kingdom. Across from Freya sat Lady Hilda,

drenched in her silks of gold and silver embroideries with her shimmering gold hair and dazzling jewels. Like Lady Eiko, Lady Hilda was just as chatty, making the duo seem more related than anything. Of course, Regent Cid was by her side in his red velvet coat and puffy sleeves, preoccupied with making his tea. Opposite of Dagger sat Cinna, Marcus, and Blank, quiet and disinterested in their tea.

“Garnet, darling, I’m telling you, you *must* come to Lindblum sometime before your birthday. Charlton and Co are releasing a brand new design of ball gowns. The rumor at the tea times is that crystals are hand stitched into the lace, oh, it sounds so divine. A fresh dress is a must for your birthday ball,” Lady Hilda said, uncaring of anyone’s opinion at the table. She spoke with vigor, squeezing her lemon into her tea with an energy that matched. “I imagine something green... perhaps even blue, would be best suited for you. Charlton and Co have the best fabrics, darling. Any color you choose will make you look radiant, but be sure to get something with frill. Something that says ‘birthday girl’.”

“I have no need to go to Lindblum for a new dress,” Garnet replied in her polite and reserved

manner. “Should there be a birthday celebration, I have a dress suited just fine.”

“The white one with those ivy’s?” Lady Hilda arched her eyebrows. “Darling, you wore that dress for your *sixteenth* birthday. A Queen cannot wear a dress twice in a row. The people will believe the Castle is broke! And enough with the should-be attitude. Your birthday is a worthy celebration. There can and will be a ball for you. It is your first birthday, however, since being crowned Queen.”

“We’ve been far too busy with other matters to consider it,” Garnet told her.

“Once Beatrix returns, so will order, and planning. You certainly cannot count on your male advisor’s to think of such things.” Just then, the doors of the Deliberation Room swung open, revealing the stoic Captain and rather drained General. Garnet immediately came to her feet, pressing her hands to the glossy surface of the table. She became acutely aware of just how sweaty they suddenly became. “Well, speak of the Devil,” Hilda said, puckering her ruby red lips.

Everyone in the room grew silent and their backs straight as they drew themselves up in anticipation as Beatrix approached the table. Her eyes were

bloodshot as she gazed emptily around the table. No one dared say a thing, but they all had a feeling they were thinking the same thought. Garnet sighed and lowered her head, her hair falling over her shoulders. “Nothing this time, either, Beatrix?”

Beatrix saluted. “I’m sorry, Your Majesty... I’ve failed to find any sign.”

“There’s no goddamn way,” Blank pushed his unappetizing tea away. “Why aren’t me and the band allowed to go with you? We know him better than anyone else. There *has* to be a clue. People don’t just disappear—”

“Blank...” Garnet’s voice was soft, but she managed to make him stop. He was on his feet now, too. ‘There is no reason to be upset with Beatrix. She has been doing everything she can.’ The calculated Queen looked back towards her General. “Not a single sign, Beatrix? Foot tracks? Sightings from any locals of the area?”

“We have spoken to people in Conde Petie as far as Treno, Your Majesty. Nobody has seen anyone of his description.”

“Did you check with Morrison in Madain Sari?” Eiko’s blue eyes appeared from behind Hilda’s



gaudy sleeves.

“Nobody has seen him,” Beatrix iterated.

“Even the Black Mages in the Village?” Vivi asked.

“I’m sorry,” Beatrix said, a tensivity mounting in her body. The entire return journey, this was the moment Beatrix dreaded the most. All of these eyes looking to her; she could see the hurt oozing from some, disappointment from others. Pure anger was beginning gestate within a few. But Beatrix felt powerless to change the situation. She couldn’t do anything. At the end of the table, Garnet had crossed her arms over her chest, her lips tilting back and forth.

“Perhaps,” Garnet finally lifted her head. “Approaching the Iifa Tree from the northern point will yield more information.”

Beatrix felt her stomach nearly flop inside of her. She had served in numerous battles, a few wars, and had had blood dribbling from the edge of sword, splattering the cobblestone beneath her; but in that moment, this felt like the worst atrocity she could commit. Though everyone had found themselves in the wake of the aftermath, everybody was still

fragile and incomplete. Beatrix only wanted what was best for Garnet and she felt like she was failing horrendously. Beatrix pursed her lips and found herself anxiously saluting again, as if to assuage any fear of disrespect.

“Your Majesty, as General of Alexandria and leader of search party efforts, I...” Beatrix paused for a moment. All sets of eyes were on her now. “I must do what is wise for the kingdom, for our resources, and our volunteers... I must cease the search.”

“What?!” Rang out around the room.

“You can’t just *give up*,” Blank sneered. “He never gave up on any of us! That’s my *brother* out there somewhere!”

“There must be more we can do,” Freya offered. “Ways we can alleviate stresses to continue.”

“I have scoured the entirety of the Outer Continent and half of the Mist Continent,” Beatrix told them. “I have spoken to nearly everyone in the vicinity. I’ve had charcoal sketches done up of him. I’ve been through all the seas, lakes, even ponds, trying to find any sign. There are none. Nothing at

the Iifa Tree or Madain Sari or Conde Petie... no where...”

“He had so much gear, though,” Eiko protested. “You should have found something of his at the Iifa Tree!”

“There was nothing,” Beatrix felt herself waning. A crushing feeling was compounding her insides. “Your Majesty... you’ve been silent.”

Garnet shook her head, lowering her hands to her side. “You are... only ending the search because there have been no clues?”

Beatrix sighed, hunching her shoulder. “Your Majesty, I’ve been part of several efforts to locate survivors in the aftermath of a devastation. After so much time with no sign, the only thing left to do is to assume—”

“Don’t you dare,” Blank shook his head and Marcus placed a hand to his tense shoulder. “Don’t you *dare* say the word I think you’re going to.”

Beatrix looked to him without any irritation or anger. She was familiar with that look. Blank was bleeding. “... Missing in action,” Beatrix managed to say in a whisper.

“Missing in action, a polite and noble way to put it,” Lady Hilda piped up, nodding her head.

“Zidane? Missing in action?” It still hadn’t quite sank in on Vivi as he adjusted his hat.

The room had broken into lower murmurs. Cinna and Marcus had wheeled Blank backwards, trying to stuff the steam coming from his ears back in. Lady Hilda entertained a rather distressed seeming Eiko while Freya and Vivi conversed on the surprised they felt. Beatrix and Steiner, however, only watched Garnet, who still stewed in her mind. It had become quite characteristic of the Queen to withdraw into herself. While she had never been the loud or chatty type, it seemed she had more freewill in previous years. Now, Garnet thought thoroughly and wholly before she spoke. And sometimes, she did not speak at all. The General sometimes missed a brash and emotional Queen. At least she would know where she stood. Sometimes it was hard to gauge whether Garnet was pleased or simply being passive for the sake of her mental anguish. Garnet was prone to bouts of depression. Doctor Tot often assured Beatrix and Steiner it was mostly seasonal. But everyone knew Garnet was bleeding in the aftermath. Not having him there every day was a

painful reminder of what had happened and it only accentuated all that she lost.

“I can’t believe this,” Blank shook his head, pacing away from the table. He paused and glanced over the others in the room. “Like I said, people don’t just disappear.”

“Bro, she’s done everything she can,” Marcus told him.

“But we can’t give up on him!” Blank threw his arms at his side before slamming his hands to the tabletop. “Dagger, say something!”

Garnet gazed down the table, pursing her lips. She didn’t blame Blank’s feelings at all. In a way, she wished she could explode, too. Nothing but disappointment and utter devastation hung to her thin frame that she wished she could simply shake away. But that was impossible. What she so dearly didn’t want to be facts were becoming a true reality. And the faces at the table all shared in the same union of emotion. Garnet lowered her head. She couldn’t expect Beatrix to continue traveling the world as she had. Especially when there hadn’t been any hopeful leads. But Garnet shared the sentiments of Blank. He never gave up on any of them. He would go to every corner of the world if it meant

finding them. But after eleven months of no signs, not even a single boot mark that matched his, maybe they were only holding onto false hope. Maybe they were only tricking themselves and doing more damage in the long run. Garnet felt so ashamed of herself even thinking it.

“For now...” Garnet said slowly. “We shall suspend the searches. Perhaps a break to clear our minds may aid in future searches. At least for... closure.”

“*Closure?*” Blank echoed, almost incredulously. “Dagger, you seriously can’t believe he is dead!”

The four letter word hurt Garnet. She nearly physically cringed at the thought. There was no way she could believe it, she thought to herself. It seemed impossible in the long list of things that he was: charismatic, free-spirited, inquisitive, understanding... she couldn’t allow herself for a moment to believe his life had met a painstaking end. It seemed so wrong, so unfitting, especially for someone like him, who deserved everything in the world just for being himself.

“It does not matter what I believe,” Garnet’s soft melodious voice carried through the tall vaulted

ceilings of the room. “But for the time being... this is the call that has to be made, Blank.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!”

Again, Marcus pressed his hand to Blank’s tense shoulder. “They’ve done everything they can right now, Blank...”

Still, Blank’s hard face stared down the table at the Queen, his nostrils nearly flared. “He’s out there somewhere. We all know it!”

Garnet wanted to believe that so desperately.

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The nocturnal creatures chirped together in unison that cool spring night. The windows of the royal chamber were open and Garnet found herself at her vanity, gingerly brushing through her thick onyx locks. She sighed as she unclipped the pendant from her neck. She turned the faceted jewel in her hand over and over before sighing again and setting it aside. She fidgeted with her brush, running her fingers along the dainty engravings meant to resemble tangled rose vines. In the reflection of the mirror, all she could focus on was the emptiness of the room behind her. Nights like these made the

Queen feel so lonely. But she was unmotivated to do anything about it. She reached across the vanity, tenderly opening a gleaming chestnut box. A slender figurine appeared. She was wearing a flowing white gown that twirled outward as it began rotating in circles. A gentle lullaby accompanied it. Her father had given it to her as a young child, not long before his passing. As the lullaby crooned out, the Queen began to lose herself in thought as she continued with an absent mind combing through her hair.

Garnet still thought about Blank earlier that day. He was nearly the embodiment of her own feelings. The last eleven months of being Queen had changed Garnet, as much as she didn't want to admit it. She almost felt bad she had lost the accent she had been taught. 'Alrighty' was not the first word on the tip of her tongue any longer. Thousands of people counted on her. She felt it was in her best interest to reduce her feelings and try to think more objectively. But in many ways, she feared she came off as insincere. She knew in heart, however, that her friends understood. Garnet wanted nothing more than a positive outcome to the tireless searches and poring over world maps. But after so many months, the emotional wear was becoming taxing. She paused from brushing her hair, turning her attention towards



the cluster of stars just beyond her window. As she came towards it, the sheer curtains brushed against her arms, making goosebumps pucker up.

“Zidane...” She whispered, as she gazed towards the vast never-ending sky. ‘Where are you? Give me a sign. What should I do?’ Only the crickets responded in jubilant waves of noises. She gripped the windowsill tightly as the cool breeze came across her cheeks. “You could not have just disappeared. That’s impossible. How could someone like you cease to exist? Where have you been this entire time? You’re the only thing that clouds my mind all day. I’m supposed to be working for the prosperity of my people and this throne and yet... all that I can think of is you. Please, return to me... I only wish for you to be here with us again... we aren’t whole without you.”

Again, only the night time noises roused and fell through her window. Garnet could only feel foolish. Every night was the same scenario. Her by her lonesome, fabricating a fake dialog to the stars and fathoms of her heart. She felt so out of sorts. Every day, she was only going through the motions, drowning herself in the guilt she felt. Some nights, she cursed herself for allowing Zidane to stay back. She dreamed endlessly of scenes where he had been

forced onto the airship. The world was not the same without him.

And Garnet was not herself without Zidane.

# Chapter Two

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## Chapter Two

The clock towering over the theater district of Lindblum chimed loudly, announcing it was ten in the morning. The birds fluttered away from the buildings that shuddered in the bonging clocks wake. The sky was clear that day and the crisp golden rays of sunshine fell across the red thatched rooftops. The City of Industry was alive and vibrant as workers headed off for another grueling day and the children raced each other in the alleys for their tutoring sessions. The distant drone of aircabs rang out over the buildings and steam rose from chimneys. The clanging of hammers and rickety machines made their way above the rapidly growing city. Just beyond the stained glass of the Tantalus hideout, several people could be seen climbing scaffolding to continue the efforts of restoring Lindblum. Women beat rugs and hung damp clothes out to dry. Men painted pottery and entertained the children who darted about in their narrow yards. It was a promising day outside with lots of movement and noise. But perched on the sill by the windows sat a rather deflated Blank. His leg dangled

carelessly below, his arm hugging his knee to his chest. He only watched passively as the housewife below pinned her husbands tunics up. It was just another day for her... but for Blank, it felt like time simply ceased to exist anymore. The only relief he had from the tormenting grief and anguish was in his sleep. Every day was the same cycle, however. He'd wake up and for a fleeting moment, everything would be alright. But the crushing of reality would set in on him, along with the bitter realization of what reality actually was. Zidane was still gone. Blank tilted his head against the window, watching a young girl coax her toddler sibling towards her. Blank could remember, fleetingly, his youth with Zidane. It had been so long and Blank wondered how much of it Zidane would have even remembered. Zidane was so small when Baku first brought him home, barely toddling on his own. Blank wasn't much older, maybe eight or nine. An even older Marcus had expressed concern about having what he considered an infant. But the young boy with the odd tail learned quickly and developed almost faster, shooting up like a weed in summertime. Blank sighed and closed his eyes, not wanting to see his face. There was shuffling below the platform and after a few moments, Cinna emerged with a bowl cereal. He cast a weary glance

towards Blank before seating himself at the community table. The man sat pensively, slurping the milk and chewing noisily on the cereal.

“Another day of window watchin’, huh, Blank?” Cinna glanced over his shoulder. His brother didn’t seem to react to his voice. Cinna sighed. “Guess I’m not surprised. You’ve only been sitting there for the past three weeks...”

Blank crossed his arms over his chest, tilting his forehead to the cool window. He pursed his lips, a sour feeling overcoming the anguish he had felt just moments before. “I don’t know how you guys can just be so chipper every day, going out to the bars, and being your normal selves... How does none of this bother you?”

“It does bother us, Blank.”

“Sure doesn’t seem like it. Actually, it feels like no one really cares. You still drink like a king, throw up like one, go out to eat, and all the other piddly bullshit,” Blank shook his head, his eyes trained on some smoke puffing out from a nearby chimney. “You guys act like he never mattered!”

Cinna’s spoon clanged to the edge of the bowl as he withheld a sigh, trying to be patient. It was

wearing thin on the elder Tantalus member, however. Cinna pivoted in his stool, looking towards the tense and constricted Blank. “I’ve told you before, it gets easier. Just ’cause I keep on with my life doesn’t mean I don’t think about him. Do you really think Zidane would be happy knowing you’re perched up by the window just letting your life slide past you?”

“I’m just taking your advice,” Blank shrugged. “If it’s supposed to get easier, then I’m just gonna sit here and wait ’til it does!”

Cinna sighed and shook his head, now just carelessly pushing his cereal about his bowl. “I think you’re taking the saying too literal...”

“I just don’t get it,” Blank said, crossing his arms over his chest and curling up tighter on the sill. “How can you all be so cheery, like nothing is wrong?”

“You’re acting like we’re dancing on his grave,” Cinna barely looked over his shoulder. Again, he tilted his breakfast around, not in the mood for it anymore. ‘Look, we’re all upset, Blank. Some people just process it differently... I’d give anything to have him here with us again. But I can’t change that.’ Cinna paused, slowly turning his body to face

his brother. “But I know that I can’t let the facts overtake me, Blank. It’s not healthy for you to just mope up there day and day again.”

“It’s been three weeks and none of us have even honored him!” Blank sat forward, his cheeks burning intensely. “He was the best thing Tantalus ever had and we’re just gonna let him go silently? Not even a single memorial service for him? A drink for him?”

Cinna stood, collecting his dishes. “Boss already said he doesn’t want anything like that.”

“And why the hell not?!” Blank’s voice had risen now, his heart rate sky rocketing. “It’s been a year and we’ve done nothing meaningful in that time without him!”

“Maybe we don’t wanna hold some elaborate event for him,” Cinna shot back, gripping the edge of his bowl tightly.

Blank staggered to his feet, a fire roaring in his eyes. Cinna was certain he’d leap from the platform to attack him. “Zidane deserves it! Why wouldn’t we?!”

Cinna was quiet, his face pensive. There was silence in the tense room, Blank’s angered eyes

hovering down on Cinna. “Because if we do that...” Cinna shook his head. “... then it will feel too real, Blank. It will be like Zidane really is dead and we’re sendin’ him off. Boss doesn’t want that. None of us do. We’re still holding out hope like you are.”

Blank pursed his lips and turned his head away. “This isn’t right. None of this is.”

“Yeah, well, we just gotta go with the punches,” Cinna told him, dumping his half-eaten bowl in the already cluttered wash basin. “Boss has always told us life ain’t fair.”

“This isn’t fair for Zidane, though,” Blank came to the edge of the platform and it creaked under his weight. “He deserved so much more than this. We can’t just move on and forget him. He was our brother, Cinna. How could Dagger just let the searches be called off? Even if he is dead, he deserves to be buried! We can’t just let his body rot under the desert sun. It’s not right!”

Cinna cocked his head back. “Do you really think Dagger wanted to call it all off, Blank? We’re all in the same boat as you. We’re upset, we’re confused, we want closure... but sometimes you just don’t get it. That’s life.”



“Well, that’s bullshit,” Blank paced away, crossing his arms over his chest again.

Cinna backpedaled to spy Blank. He was gazing over the bed that used to belong to Zidane. It was a rumpled mess and above it on the shelves, his old airship model collection still gleamed with the shedding daylight. “All I can say, Blank, is that things will get easier. Maybe not right now... it’s all still fresh... but we have to live our lives to their fullest. You never know when it’ll get cut short. Right now, we can honor him by putting on our best performance of *I Want to Be Your Canary* for Dagger’s birthday next week.”

“I’m not doing it,” Blank said with his back to Cinna, his eyes trained on the models Zidane had dutifully assembled in his youth. “I think it’s blasphemous Dagger would even ask for such a thing. The blocking is all wrong without Zidane! It won’t be the same.”

“Well... I hope you change your mind,” Cinna said, crossing down the stairs towards the door. He took one more glance at Blank who was tense and upset. He had been this way, very testy, ever since their disappointing return from Alexandria. The band worried about him, naturally. Every letter Ruby

sent had a barrage of questions about Blank, but no one really knew what to say. What could they even say? Nothing would take away Blank's hurt. Zidane was closest in age to him. They could have been blood brothers for all anyone knew. Everyone had been affected by Zidane's sudden absence but no one could predict this level of grief and intensity inside of Blank. And nobody had any way to solve the pent up aggression that overtook the young man. Cinna shuffled his feet for a moment. 'I'm goin' down to the Business District to see what's going on... maybe stop by that cheap little Nickelodeon theater. Wanna come?' He waited a few beats, but it was like Blank hadn't even heard him. Still, he fixated on the airship models, recounting their youthful teasing of Zidane who was so fascinated by the machines. "You know..." Cinna sighed, gripping the doorknob. "You're not the only one who lost someone special to them. Zidane was our brother, too."

And with that, Cinna opened the door. A slanted beam of sunlight came across the musty hideout, along with the noises of everyday life. The door closed quietly behind him, shutting out the world that continued to spin. Blank felt so frustrated. The world was continuing on without a care. What a

waste, was all Blank could think. Men could take their sweethearts out for treats, children could play in the streets, and airships could stream through the clouds— but none of that would even be possible today without Zidane. How could the world carry on as if nothing had happened? How could anyone accept that this was the way it was going to be? How was Blank going to survive knowing Zidane didn't? He ground his teeth together, tearing himself away from Zidane's knick knacks. He seated himself back on the windowsill, watching the housewife move on past the laundry and begin sweeping the back stoop of her house.

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Beatrix had a throbbing headache. She knew she shouldn't have skipped breakfast, but she wasn't feeling one percent that morning and chose to jump it for the sake of her rounds. The General was still reeling from her travels. With age, it seemed it only took longer for her to recover from long arduous and disappointing journeys. The castle was quite busy with movement, as well. Several maids dashed past her as she made her way towards the front foyer. Garnet's birthday gala was only six days away. The garden team worked tirelessly on trimming hedges

and bushes, dutifully feeding the plants with growing herbs and plenty of water. The maids cleaned endlessly, sometimes following right on other people's heels to sweep up behind them. Lady Hilda and Lady Eiko had arrived the day before to give Garnet company and also pester her with new dresses despite Garnet's exasperation. Beatrix wished Garnet didn't feel so low about her birthday, but the General could understand why. It only brought up painful memories, undoing the healing of scars, and snapping heart strings. Garnet had met Zidane on her sixteenth birthday. It must have been a devastating thought to know he wasn't around for her seventeenth celebration. As Beatrix walked into the bright daylight, she felt her head twinge in pain. She desperately needed a cup of tea. They just had to make it through the gala, Beatrix told herself. Then things could, possibly, become normal again. However, the woman would kick herself every time she looked at the Queen, knowing she had failed in finding any trace of her lost love. Squad Beatrix and the Knights of Pluto saluted as Beatrix made her way through the winding garden, towards the furthest eastern section. Once she reached the fork, she turned right, for the private quarters she and Steiner shared. Behind her was the tall three story living barracks of the soldiers. She pushed the door

open, letting out a sigh and welcoming the quietness. The kitchen window was open in the narrow room as Beatrix set about putting the kettle on the stove and choosing which tea bag she wanted. Her head faced another rapid throb and she paused for a moment, deciding she would snack on the chocolate wafers she found in the cupboard.

It wasn't long before the kettle whistled and Beatrix was seated at the table by herself, holding a hand to her throbbing head. Everything had been so draining as of late. Beatrix and Steiner felt it was of utmost importance to keep Garnet happy, but it was a difficult task. The young ruler was prone to bouts of depression in the confines of the castle. She was still dutiful to have audiences of grievances from the people of Alexandria, she still took the time to make appearances, but it came at the cost of her mental health most days. Beatrix admired the way Garnet still was able to carry herself in the face of adversity, but she worried at night, in the lonesome of her private chambers, that Garnet only crumpled and gave in to her despairing feelings. The General wished there was more to be done. In the three weeks since her return, the feeling of guilt, the feeling of letting people down, had not alluded her. It followed Beatrix incessantly. What could she do,

though? There were no signs of Zidane. Not a footprint, not a trail of blood— absolutely nothing. What had happened to him? Where could he be? Steiner had suggested in privacy that perhaps Zidane had been lost beneath the falling Ifa Tree, but no one dared utter the thought in front of the Queen. Without a trace, Beatrix was at a loss. And every day she wondered where he was... even if she had just found his body, at least they would have answers. But for now, everyone had to sit in the dark and twiddle their thumbs; come to the terms on their own time. But just how long would that take?

The front door opened, filling the foyer with light. Beatrix cocked her eyebrows up and leaned forward, seeing Steiner come through the door. He let out a long sigh, pulling his helmet from his head to reveal his rustled short cropped dark hair. After a moment, he realized he wasn't alone by the smell of mint tea reaching him. He disregarded his helmet on the foyer table, emerging into the kitchen where Beatrix sat by the open window. Beatrix gripped her tea cup.

“There's hot water in the kettle,” She told him.

Steiner began sifting through the cupboards for a glass and a tea bag. “Mint tea?” He glanced over his

shoulder as he poured his water. “Are you feeling alright?”

“Just tired,” Beatrix assured him, toying with the saucer beneath her cup. “I didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Or the night before,” Steiner pointed out. His armor shuddered as he seated himself across the table. He had such broad shoulders, a force to be reckoned with, that he almost was comically too large for their living quarters. “You should see the doctor in the infirmary. Perhaps you inhaled too much dust on the Outer Continent.”

Beatrix grinned lightly. “I think I’ll survive. Have you seen Her Majesty today?”

“Oh, yes,” Steiner nodded, stirring his tea. “She is with Lady Hilda and Eiko discussing birthday logistics. I know Her Majesty’s energy is waning.”

“Did you see the amount of dresses Lady Hilda brought with her?” Beatrix shook her head at the thought. “The guards carried off nearly *four* trunks worth of dresses! Surely Lady Hilda doesn’t expect Her Majesty to try all of them on?”

“Hm, maybe you don’t know Lady Hilda too well,” The couple shared a small laugh and Beatrix

sighed, biting into her chocolate wafer. “I received a letter from Baku.”

“Oh, really,” Beatrix said, lowering her tea cup. “They’re still performing, right? We cannot have anything go wrong at this birthday celebration.”

“They will, yes,” Steiner nodded. “They’re having to workshop the play a bit. Baku, however, assured me it would continue as normal, even if Blank ultimately chooses not to partake.”

“Oh, yes, Blank...” Beatrix lowered her eyes, recounting his outrage in the Deliberation Room only weeks ago. “I assume his depression is not seasonal.”

Steiner reached across the table, gripping Beatrix’s thin wrist. “Nothing that you caused... it’s just hard on all of us.”

“It’s all so difficult....” Beatrix sighed, her head throbbing all over. “I wish there was more I could do.”

“You did everything you could,” Steiner squeezed her wrist in assurance. “We’re all doing the best we can.”

“How are you holding up?”



“Just fine,” Steiner said. Beatrix suspected he was lying. “My utmost attention still goes to Her Majesty, as usual. I will admit, though, it’s hard accepting Zidane is gone.”

“I only wish I knew where he was,” Beatrix lowered her eyes. “Labeling him as missing in action seems so... wrong. It’s hard to think Zidane is dead but, Steiner...”

“I know,” He shook his head. “It’s hard for me to imagine, too, but no clues, no sightings...”

Beatrix’s head hurt yet again and she drank mint tea to offset it. “Was this really Zidane’s fate?”

Steiner was slow to reply as he retracted his hand. His skin had left a warm spot on Beatrix’s wrist. She watched him earnestly as he stirred his tea, rather awkwardly. Steiner glanced to the window, admiring the evergreen hedges that grew just beyond it. Finally, he licked his lips. “I don’t know... After what we found out on Terra, how *could* we? He was destined for so much on Gaia... but it falls short of what was destined for Terra. With the planet extinguished... I don’t know what it all means...”

In the Alexandrian Castle, every conversation seemed to come back to Zidane. Only a year ago, he

would have been seen as a low-life, a person never allowed into the castle. But now, he was revered by all the knights, the soldiers, and even the castle staff. His name seemed to be spoken in all corners of the property and scholars decided how they'd immortalize him. It all seemed so foreign to Steiner, who had a whirlwind of emotions towards Zidane in the past year. He had seen him as scum, then redeemable, and in today's time as a hero and a right fit for Her Majesty despite his lowborn title to this planet. But all of that seemed lost in the mist. Steiner knew Zidane gave great happiness to Queen Garnet and that was his only wish; to restore her smile in this world. But now that he was gone, Steiner seemed to flounder without his charismatic touch, his natural people skills.

"I'm sorry..." Beatrix's voice was quiet in their small living quarters. "I know he meant a great deal to you."

"I just worry for Her Majesty," Steiner shook his head.

"But *you* cared for him, as well."

Steiner was slow to nod. "I did... and yet life goes on and I can't help but think: what was it all for, tragically wasting such a young life?"

“That is war,” Beatrix hugged her mug close. “We lose the innocent, the young... it’s unfair but it’s become a fact of life.”

Steiner sighed. “It’s just hard to accept that Zidane died... of all people, it should have been me —”

“Steiner...”

“I’ve lived a long full life... his was only to begin...”

Beatrix grabbed his arm now, directing his dark eyes towards her. “That is no way to think. You suffered, too. You made your sacrifices. You didn’t just get lucky, Steiner. You survived.”

He heaved another sigh, looking out the window. “I will wonder for the rest of my days what life would have been like if Zidane had survived...”

# Chapter Three

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## Chapter Three

“Darling, please, just do a small spin... for me?” Lady Hilda puckered her red lips out as she cradled her tea cup close. She was seated on the plush brocade couch in the royal chambers of Queen Garnet. An evening sun was beginning to bleed through the open windows. Beside her, young Eiko, freshly seven years old, sat and tried to mimic the posture of her adoptive mother. Eiko’s startling purple hair had been allowed to grow out and Lady Hilda always had it dutifully braided into a thick plait that followed the curvature of her round head. Short teased bangs were allowed to frame her bright face and her braid was poised to rest on her wiry shoulders. She did her best to straighten her back, but she still wasn’t used to the constricting and somewhat itchy affair of nice satin dresses with several useless ribbons. Some days, Eiko genuinely missed her rompers and overalls, but Lady Hilda insisted it was unbecoming of a young girl being groomed to lead a great nation. Across the sitting area from the Fabool matriarch and daughter, stood a rather displeased queen. Garnet’s dark onyx hair had

been pulled up into a bun atop her head, like an obsidian mountain rising from her unhappy face. She was dressed in a dark blue satin dress with black lace cuffs and collars. The bodice stuck tightly to her thin torso and flared past her hips. Garnet felt like nothing short of a hot air balloon.

“I don’t like the color,” Garnet said, glancing down and grimacing at the ludicrous fashion. “It’s no better than the last one, Aunt Hilda.”

“But, darling,” Hilda was quick to set her tea cup down and jump to her feet. Her pumps were muted against the thick carpets that ran across Garnet’s chambers. She came towards her niece, wrapping her arms around her stiff shoulders. ‘This is *high* fashion! Every woman will be wearing Charlton and Co or will be busy envying the women who had the means to obtain one. I fought tooth and nail with a noble woman to walk out with these dresses! So you don’t like this blue? Try on the green one. It has lacy sleeves, which I just know you would adore!’ Hilda didn’t even wait to turn Garnet around, pulling the zipper down her back. “Just think, sweetheart: you’re wearing one of these fabulous dresses and a beautiful suitor emerges from the crowd to dance with you!” Hilda gushed as Garnet pulled the sleeves down to reveal the thin slip beneath. “You

two will spin about the dance floor, beneath a magnificent sky of stars, and your full skirt will make it look as if you're both simply floating!"

Garnet shimmied from the dress and Hilda caught it as she stepped out. The satin slip hanging from Garnet's body shimmered in the orange and pink lights that now painted the room. She hugged herself, looking towards her aunt. "That's not quite how I envisioned the night progressing..."

"Darling..." Hilda shook her head, holding the crumpled dress to her chest. "You do recognize what you're doing to yourself is not healthy, right?"

Garnet seated herself at her vanity, adjusting the weight of all her hair atop her head. "I've not even been Queen for a year yet... it's too soon to just marry myself off. For the time being, I do not wish to be married."

"Well, of course, you're just fine as Queen on your own," Hilda said, dutifully laying the blue dress down and lifting the green one up. "But just picture a dashing king to sit beside you for portraits and hold your delicate little hand! The company will be good for you. You don't have to love him, darling."

Garnet stared at her reflection, pursing her lips. Her bold brows furrowed together. “Do you love Uncle Cid? Truly?”

Hilda clucked her tongue as she picked imaginary lint from the freshly pressed dress. “Of course I do, sweetheart. He’s a gentleman... well, a reformed gentleman, more or less. It took some work, but I have him where I want him.”

Garnet swiveled on her velvet stool. “Did you love him when you married him, though?”

“Oh, darling, you’re getting muddled in the weeds,” Hilda said as she presented the next dress forward. ‘I understand, sweetheart, it’s all with due time.’ She lowered the dress to peer at her young niece, whose dark eyes were quite serious. “I truly understand where you’re coming from, dear Garnet. If you loved Zidane even a quarter as much as Eiko did, I understand, sweetheart.”

“Mother,” Eiko protested. It still felt rather foreign to say. “Zidane and Dagger were meant to be together!”

“Yes, dear, I know,” Hilda nodded. ‘But we can’t always have what we want, right? Don’t you remember my lessons in modesty?’ Hilda thrust the

dress towards Garnet. “One more, please, dear. For me? I cannot sit idly by and allow you to wear the same dress for your seventeenth birthday. It goes against all the fibers in my being! I only want you to be happy, darling, don’t you know that?”

Garnet lowered her eyes, falling lost in her mind for a moment. How dearly she wished she could choose happiness. If only it was easy as Lady Hilda proclaimed it to be. Garnet felt unnerved by the idea of her own birthday celebration. Zidane had showed up, unannounced, only a year ago. For months following the ordeal, she had struggled to understand why. But now, she knew it had been destiny. They had been meant to meet that fateful night. In many ways, it felt as Garnet’s entire life had been turned upside down. But she wouldn’t change a thing about it.

Garnet stood in the next moment, the stool creaking beneath her. With the fading sherbet of evening lights coming over her smooth and clear olive skin, she approached the window, gripping the sill tightly. The growing and prospering Alexandria was beginning to glow with the coming twilight. Scaffolding peaked between the tight knit buildings and Garnet could clearly spy the stacks of wood and stone that awaited their day of construction. In some



ways, it felt as if the past eleven months simply dragged on, grim and bleak. But some days, it felt as if it just flew past her. Soon, it would mark an entire year from when first met Zidane. A painful knot constricted in her belly at the time. How could it be so short of a time? Garnet felt as if she'd known him her entire life.

“Do you think...” Garnet said slowly, still looking over her kingdom. “... there's a chance Zidane may return?”

From behind, Lady Hilda looked to Eiko pointedly, as if to remind her of her manners. Eiko folded her hands together, tilting her head. Eiko, in the deepest fathoms of her heart, did not want to believe Zidane may have perished. The young girl thought the world of Zidane and could imagine no scenario where the impish blond boy would be trumped. But as time waned on and other life events came into factor, it began to dawn on the seven year old that he possibly had met his fate, just as her grandfather, her entire family, all of her people, had. It was difficult understanding the full concept of life and death. Even after all she had faced and learned and discovered, the true concept still alluded the child. Her heart hurt for Garnet, as it hurt in her own chest.

“We’ll never stop thinking about him, darling,” Lady Hilda replied, hugging the sheening dress to her chest. “Zidane was an excellent man, no doubt. He’s helped everyone tremendously. But I do not like the way you are treating yourself, Garnet. You are not responsible for what happened to that boy. You can love him forever, but that will not change facts, darling.”

Eiko climbed down from the couch, taking a moment to arrange the annoying petticoat beneath her skirt. “Dagger, we’ll never stop holding out hope... no matter how much time has passed. But Mother is right. Zidane wouldn’t want you to punish yourself like this.”

Garnet watched the sinking sunset for a moment before turning back towards the Ladies of Lindblum. “I will try the dress for you, Aunt Hilda,” Garnet said, reaching for the glimmering fabric. Hilda was eager to pass it along. “The olive green is a nice color...”

“Oh, it will compliment those little doe eyes and red cheeks very well,” Lady Hilda declared, running her hand along Garnet’s smooth jaw.

The day of Garnet's evening birthday gala had arrived. It had become one of the most important things among all staff at the Alexandrian Castle. Everything had to be *perfect*. And that was Beatrix's definition of perfect, at that. The soldiers were already about securing the perimeter and ordering stops to visitors for the time being. No one was allowed across the river until six-thirty that evening. The maids had been on their knees since dawn, scrubbing baseboards, nooks and crannies— some had even decided to scrub the gray brick of the castle garden. Green and gold satin banners were being delicately pinned to balustrades and draped over hedges. Technicians worked diligently to prepare the landing space for Tantalus' airship. The kitchen staff, headed by Quina, had mostly been up all night, painstakingly carving butter to reflect delicate roses, and piping warm chocolate to form beautiful doves and geese. The birthday cake had only been two tiers high the night before. It now towered to nearly six tiers of moist lemon cake, Garnet's favorite. The Castle of Alexandria was abuzz with energy and dedication that morning.

However, the General of Alexandria didn't even feel like rising from bed. Her headaches had only grown worse. Sometimes, it was awful just standing

up. She was convinced it was just onset by her frustrating confusions of grief and shame and guilt. Every night she dreamed of Zidane and she hated it. She could still hear his voice and see that boyish smile. For someone who didn't take himself seriously, he was quite the force to reckon with. Beatrix only felt horrible when she thought or dreamed of Zidane. He was so young and like Steiner had said, so full of promise. How could they lose him? Nobody left behind, Beatrix wanted to tell herself, but it was too late. She had broken the cardinal sin as a commander of people in action: she had carelessly let one of her people fall adrift. *Where are you?* Beatrix would nearly plead him in her dreams. *Just tell me where I can find you!* Though it would shatter everyone to their core to find Zidane's body, Beatrix was convinced it was better than living in this world of not knowing. She had failed, she kept telling herself, digging her face into the pillow. She had let everyone down. There was more she could do, Beatrix was certain. She had dropped the ball and now she had to live with this failure on her shoulders. Queen Garnet must have been ashamed to have a General such as her.

The gas lamp on her bedside table flicked on and Beatrix cringed against the sudden intrusion, draping

her arm across her pounding forehead. She spied Steiner standing beside the bed, his arms crossed over his chest. “Looks like you didn’t learn your lesson when you had the flu,” Steiner clucked, drawing the blankets back on Beatrix’s body. “We’re just going to have to do it the hard way, aren’t we, Beatrix?” He brought his arms down to scoop her from beneath, but Beatrix wriggled.

“No! I refuse to go to the doctor. I only have a headache, let me rest,” Beatrix protested, digging herself further into the bed.

“Beatrix, you’re sick!” Steiner said, reaching for her arm. She was quick to evade, however. “You’re not feeling well! We should take you to the doctor to make sure you didn’t come back with something! Maybe some sort of desert fever?!”

“That doesn’t even exist,” Beatrix pressed her face into the pillow. “Just a few hours rest, I swear. And then I’ll get to work helping for the gala. I’ll be well for the event this evening.”

“You’re not invincible,” Steiner was nearly pleading as he climbed onto the side of the bed, pressing his hand to her thigh. “It’s not normal to feel this ill so long after a return from a journey.”

“Look, I appreciate the concern,” Beatrix reached up, grazing his jawline. “You’re very tender and loving, Steiner. But I don’t need to take up a hospital bed for such an asinine condition.”

“You’re the General, though!”

“Just a few hours rest, that’s all,” Beatrix told him sternly, curling up beneath the covers and closing her eyes.

The Captain pursed his lips and sighed. He then stood from the bed and flicked the gas lamp off, encasing the bedroom in darkness.

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The sound of bells awoke Beatrix hours later. Her eyes flew open at the revelation of their tone and beat. They were the announcement of an airship arrival. The General cursed under her breath as she sluggishly brought herself from bed, realizing it had waned far into the afternoon. Tantalus must have been arriving. Hurriedly, she stumbled from bed despite her headache not easing. She clumsily staggered into her pants and laced her boots, barely taking the time to tie the ribbon across the bust of her tunic. She took only a few seconds to comb and fluff her hair, messily applying rouge to her cheeks

to make herself look as healthy as possible. Beatrix attached her sword to her hip and quickly left her quarters.

Over the tall green hedges of the garden, Beatrix spotted the new and improved Vista Cruiser sailing through the sky. It only confirmed to Beatrix it was after three o'clock which meant she was behind on everything. She had to check the cake. And the appetizers. She needed to make sure the mead and cocktails were chilling. Had all the foyer rugs been washed and dusted? And did the gardeners remember to pluck the weeds surrounding the Royal Family's burial site? The General ground her teeth together as she took off in a hurry. She was already so far behind on what she believed to be the most important day of the year. Nothing could be wrong for Garnet's seventeenth birthday. After everything she had gone through, the Queen deserved a perfect gala beneath the stars.

When Beatrix came through the tall arching chestnut doors of the Castle's foyer, she nearly ran straight into the back of Steiner. The Captain was holding his hands up, pitching directions at a group of maids who furiously stumbled back and forth with the long running carpet. "Further back... a little to the right... no, my right. Right there, that's

perfect,” Steiner waved his hands in dismissal and arched his eyebrows when a flash of brown caught his eyes. “Beatrix, you’re finally up. How are you feeling?”

“Much better,” The General lied. Her stomach was still constricted and twisted in guilt and shame, however. “What else needs to be done? Have the statues—”

“The maids took toothbrushes to all of them,” Steiner nodded.

“And the garden—”

“Is groomed to perfection.”

“The food, has it—”

“Been chilled? Yes. The cake looks great, by the way.”

Beatrix let out a sigh and glanced around the large foyer that glistened and sparkled. It felt somewhat lively with the satin streamers tied to the marble balustrades. Flag lines draped from the high rafters. For a moment, Beatrix could believe that it hadn’t been an entire year that had passed. Everything seemed just normal enough, she could have sworn nothing had actually happened. But how



she felt inside could not deceive her from the time that had elapsed. Beatrix felt completely out of sorts, as if this wasn't even her body. The awful feeling she had endured since asking to call the search off made her believe she couldn't remember how to function normally or make her body do what she wanted. She felt utterly powerless and that frightened her. From above, the loud bass of the bells rang out again.

“Tantalus must be losing altitude,” Beatrix turned for the door. ‘I shall go greet them and then meet with the maid’s team that is dressing and grooming Her Majesty.’ A chilly gust of spring air came over her and she shivered, looking over her shoulder at Steiner. “Thank you for picking up my slack. It is greatly appreciated.” She didn’t wait a moment more for Steiner to speak, however. She only could suspect he would still protest her dismay and awkwardness. But Beatrix had no time to confront such frivolous things. She had failed, but now she wanted to succeed. For the rest of her life, she couldn’t let anyone down. Her shoes clapped to the sullen gray brick path beneath her as she traveled to the western portion of the garden. The dying drone of airship engines reached her ears and her hair was lifted by the forceful breezes the airship still made.

She was greeted by a scene of soldiers and technicians darting everywhere, securing the ship, tying ropes, and inspecting the landing area. Soldiers scurried to place a board to the side of the ship and only a moment passed before the familiar people of Tantalus came pouring down the side. Baku, Cinna, and Marcus crossed towards Beatrix, but one more figure caught her attention and Beatrix lifted her eyes over the top of Baku's worn leather cap. The tall, round man looked over his shoulder.

"Ah, yeah... we got 'im to come after all. It was a fight, but we're all here," Baku said. "We're just gonna need a light and sound check."

"Yes, Bonnan will be in charge of that this evening," Beatrix nodded. "It's good to see all of you. Thank you for being here this evening."

Blank was slow to join the side of the band and he didn't even look to Beatrix. Blank gawked his head to look at the familiar performing area, his eyes resting on the balcony where, in just a few hours, Queen Garnet would be sitting. The decorations surrounding him of rich green and gold banners, festive party flags, and bursting bouquets of white daisies and lily-of-the-valley's did not seem to

delight him in the least. He was oozing with bitter hurt.

“Wouldn’t dream of missin’ it,” Marcus said. “How’s the Birthday Girl?”

“Oh, you know,” Beatrix tilted her head. “Jittery.”

“Well, we’ve been practicin’ a lot,” Cinna told her, gesturing widely. “I hope we can give Dagger the best play we’ve ever done.”

“It’s gonna be our first show in a while,” Baku shuffled his feet. “And this is the first show we won’t be swipin’ anything from under your noses. Unless there’s cheese. Is there gonna be cheese?”

“Plenty, take as much as you’d like,” Beatrix grinned politely.

“Where’s Dagger?” Blank asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

“She’s getting ready in her chambers,” Beatrix replied. “That’s actually where I’m heading to next. She’ll speak with all of you this evening. I’m certain Your Majesty is excited to see you.”

“Hey, while we set up, do you think you could get a servant to bring us a tray of cheese?” Baku guffawed ruggedly. “I didn’t ask when we were

negotiatin' the whole thing, but if there's cheese, I don't think the nobles'll mind we swiped one for ourselves."

Beatrix smiled. "Sure, I'll have one sent."

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From high above, Garnet stood at her window, gazing down at the scene of the arriving Tantalus. Baku's laugh reached her ears and for a faint moment, it made her smile. Her damp hair fell against the nape of her neck. She turned away from watching Beatrix greet the band and hugged her silk white robe close to her slender body. It would be Garnet's first time seeing Blank since she agreed to drop the search. Cinna and Baku wrote often, but she had not heard from the youngest Tantalus member nor did the crew reasonably answer her concerns about him. She hoped Blank knew that she felt exactly as he did. Garnet had spent many restless nights thinking about Zidane. Every waking moment, any delay in concentration, she only thought of him. Blank was right: people don't just disappear. But what more could she do? He really had vanished.

“Dagger, come have some tea!” Eiko said from the couch, noisily clattering her tea cup and saucer together. Lady Hilda had already had Eiko dressed and groomed. The matriarch was getting done in her chambers at the moment. Regent Cid would be arriving soon. Eiko’s hair had been done up in an elaborate do. Her silky purple locks had been coiled to resemble roses and pearly hair clips adorned her head. She had been dressed in a yellow satin dress with long bell sleeves and purple embroideries that spanned across the chest and over her shoulders. “It’ll calm you down. Are you nervous?” Garnet was still for a moment before she chose to sit with Eiko.

“I never did like being the center of attention,” Garnet said, her eyes cast down as she poured her tea. “Somehow, though, I always find a way to become it.”

“Everyone just wants to make sure your happy,” Eiko shook her head, but stopped when she remembered her styled hair. “You are the queen, after all.”

“Well, I certainly don’t feel like,” Garnet sat back in the love seat, looking at the newfound princess.

“Dagger, cheer up!” Eiko puffed her lower lip out. “You know, it won’t be considered blasphemous

to allow yourself to be happy for *one* evening. Zidane would want you to be happy, anyway. At least, that's what I tell myself."

"You're right," Garnet tenderly blew the steam away from her tea. "He always just wanted what was best for us..."

Eiko was quiet for a moment, glancing towards Garnet's poster bed where several dresses were laid out. "Let's have some real girl talk, Dagger. Princess to Princess. We shouldn't spend the afternoon before your party having a wake for Zidane. We should celebrate you, for being the best you you can be." Eiko set her tea down, tugging on her Garnet's hand. "C'mon, let's look at your dress options one last time. Without Mother hovering over your every move, you can make a last minute change."

"Oh, I don't know," Garnet placed her tea on the rich mahogany table and followed Eiko to inspect the garments Lady Hilda had dutifully laid out. 'Auntie Hilda will be very upset if I don't wear the green one like I promised.' Garnet lifted the dress and watched it glimmer in the afternoon light. "Do I really want to have her upset the entire gala?"

"It's not *her* birthday," Eiko put her hands on her hips. Despite a year of proper classes and several

lessons, Garnet was convinced Lady Hilda would never chase the sass completely out of the young fireball. “She can do whatever she wants for her party. Do you really like the green one?”

“Well, the color is nice,” Dagger said as she laid the dress back down, turning her attention to the black one with a high collar. “This dress has a nice flow to it, though.”

“The silver one with the sweetheart neckline made you look very dainty and slender,” Eiko pointed across the bed.

“Oh, but the lace on the cuffs is terribly itchy.”

“Getting picky now, I like it,” Eiko grinned. “You keep looking. I’m gonna see what jewelry I can find to accent the dresses!”

Garnet welcomed the task. It gave her a semblance of normality that she didn’t realize she desperately needed. For only being seven years old, Eiko seemed to be managing quite well. Garnet was nearly envious, but she hoped with due time, she could come to accept things for what they were. For the moment, she devoted herself to inspecting all of the dresses again. The green one was a modest and safe choice, she decided. The black one was far too

moody. The silver one, while elegant, would not be comfortable. The yellow dress, however, felt childish and overly bright to her. The blue one wasn't a favored shade of blue, it looked rather murky to the Queen. That only left a powder pink dress with dark lace. Garnet sighed, shaking her head. That dress was much too rosy for her. Lady Hilda claimed they were the top notch. While the quality certainly was, Garnet found it hard to believe women were playing tug of war over such lackluster designs.

“Dagger, I think you should wear this one.” The Queen turned, watching as Eiko emerged from the large walk-in closet. She was beaming as she held up the white cotton dress with twisting ivy's. In Eiko's hands, she clutched the delicate arm coverings. Eiko crossed towards her friend, extending the dress outward. “If it'll make you happy, that is.”

Garnet was slow to take the fabric into her hands. It nearly burned her with an intensity of flooding memories. She remembered when her mother had it made for her. That was the last thing they did together before things began to go awry. In her hurry to get help, Garnet had nearly fled the castle wearing it, but decided last minute to change into something



more forgiving. She held it up against the bright light of the sun, admiring it. It felt right beneath her palms.

“Let’s put these dresses back in Aunt Hilda’s trunk,” Garnet lowered the dress. “Quickly, before Beatrix and the maids arrive.”

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The audience hooted as Benero and Zenero rushed off the stage from a fierce looking Blank and arm flailing Cinna. A hush came over the crowd as they now zeroed in on the scene of Marcus and King Leo. To the side, a melodramatic Ruby did her best to display distress as she watched the scene develop. From above, Garnet sat in the stiff throne, gazing down at the stage pooled in light. She was poised delicately with her shoulders drawn back, sitting straight as an arrow, with her hands settled into her lap. Just behind her, Beatrix and Steiner stood at attention.

Baku turned towards Ruby, lifting his arm out in gesture. For such a large stocky man, he had mastered the art of eloquence. “Pray, sweet daughter, come home to the castle with me.”

Ruby brought her hands out from her side. “Nay, Father! I shan’t return!”

Baku shook his head, pacing towards her. “Cornelia... trouble me no more. This wedding is for thine own welfare. Be mindful of that.”

Marcus stepped forward, brandishing his sword. His face was painted in frustration. “Not if I can help it!” Marcus’ strong voice sailed across the audience and many of the viewers clutched their pearls and husband’s arms as the tensity in the scene grew. “Now is my moment of vengeance! For my parents, and for my love, Cornelia... I shall cut thee down!” Marcus reared his sword back widely, driving it straight forward. In the next moment, however, Ruby dove in front of the bracing Baku, sending the sword between her arm. Ruby let out a loud cry and forced mangled breaths before collapsing across the floor. The audience screamed, jolted, and cried out. Garnet’s hands tightened in her lap, remembering distinctly her moments on that stage.

“No! Cornelia!” Marcus’ hands visibly shook as he collapsed beside her, cradling her head in his arms. Audience members began to openly weep.

“Mar... cus... forgive me,” Ruby sputtered out. “I still love my father...” From the balcony, Garnet mouthed every word to herself.

“Cornelia!” Baku bellowed, unsteady himself for a moment.

Ruby cocked her head towards the ailing Baku. “Prithee, forgive my selfishness, Father, and spare my sweet Marcus...”

Marcus staggered to his feet, looking towards his red hands from the snipped dye packet in Ruby’s lacing. “What have I done?!” He cried out towards the audience. Handkerchiefs now flailed through the crowd. “Am I never to hear her loving voice again!? Am I cursed never again to feel her soft touch?! O, cruel fate! Thou hast robbed me of all I treasure!” Marcus then howled upwards in a frustrated rage and in the same swoop brandished a dagger from his vest. Marcus hurled it through his chest and the audience gasped sharply as he fell to his knees and crumbled across the floor, only a few feet away from the now motionless Ruby.

The performing arena became very quiet in that moment as a solemn Baku looked over the bodies. He was slow to ease himself down, seating himself beside Ruby. Cautiously, he toyed with her hair and

gazed outward, as Marcus had done once before. The light of the eastern sun glowed softly in the background now as it faded into dawn. Baku then crumpled forward, resting his head to Ruby's bloodied torso. On the edge of the light, Blank as Schneider stood passively to the side, watching the scene unfurl in an almost catatonic state. Many in the audience would chalk it up to director's choice. The light closed on the stage and audience went into an uproar of whistles, hoots, and thunderous applause. Their chairs scraped as they came to their feet, jumping up and down, their cheeks rosy and their eyes wet. Garnet stood, coming to the edge of the balcony and clapping.

Tantalus had done a magnificent job. Though there had been small snippets changed to flesh out a large act with such a little crew, it came across to Garnet had genuine and probably one of her most favored renditions of the beloved classic. She certainly missed Zidane's overpowering presence on the stage and though Cinna was quite deft, he hadn't executed the sword fight with Blank as seamlessly. Altogether, however, it exceeded Garnet's expectations. The lights came up on the stage again, revealing the cast lined up shoulder to shoulder. Tantalus bowed and waved their hands in thanks.

“A very happy birthday to Your Majesty, Queen Garnet!” Baku shouted over all the noise. Garnet blew them a kiss. From the edge of the line-up, however, Blank’s face was hard as stone.

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The party kicked off mere moments of Tantalus’ departure from the stage. Everyone gravitated from their seats, funneling themselves towards the courtyard on the water front. Women flocked together in hoards, fighting over mirrors to fix their make up. The sound of drums began to echo across the garden, followed by bag pipes, flutes, and lutes. The audience then howled with delight upon finding a spacious dancer floor and tables of decadent foods. Grilled mackerel on beds of greens. Bowls of cherry tomatoes soaked in olive oil. Ramekins of little chocolates, trays of several different types of cheese. There were cherry tarts, blueberry tarts, and cream cheese filled puff pastries. It was all fit for a decadent court. Champagne fizzled, along with mimosas and tall steins of mead from the local brew master. It wasn’t long before the people of Alexandria began making a ruckus of fun, momentarily forgetting it was all for Queen Garnet’s birthday. Garnet had many people to speak with

upon first arriving to the courtyard. Lady Hilda was the first, who made a steaming beeline through the crowd, a mimosa already in hand. Her face seemed pinched in frustration, but upon seeing the coming wave of people towards the Queen, Hilda straightened her face out and grinned. She wrapped her arm around Garnet's shoulders, directing her towards the refreshment table.

"What happened to all the dresses I left in your chambers?" Hilda asked with a smile despite her tense tone.

"I thought I would be more comfortable in this," Garnet said, reaching for a bubbly glass of champagne.

"Darling, the words comfortable and fashion never go hand in hand," Hilda sighed, glancing towards the crowds of people. "Never mind that, you look dashing, darling. There is someone I would like you to meet."

"Who might that be?" Garnet paused, knitting her eyebrows together.

"Oh, come on, it's a party, don't be shy!" Lady Hilda laughed, placing her hand to Garnet's back and directing her into the scene. "They truly are

good friends of mine. Why, I went to Finishing School with her and her family means the world to me. They've been so great with Lady Eiko, too, they're a true delight and I'd like you too meet them.' Lady Hilda swiveled her head around the congested courtyard, peering through the bodies of men in chugging contests and ladies daintily eating their fish. "Yoo-hoo! Shari, darling! Over here!" Lady Hilda fluttered her hand through the air.

It only took a moment for three people to emerge from the crowd. Shari was not a very tall woman, but wore a tall hat with a delicate shroud of lace falling towards her shoulders. She had brown hair, pleated into a braid to the small of her back. Her cheeks were plump and red and she was bathed in white and gold muslins that clung to her curvy body. Beside her was who Garnet assumed was her husband. He was an older gentleman with wrinkles that distinguished him. His salt and pepper hair had been combed back neatly, his beard uniform along his strong jaw. And next to him, Garnet looked at Shari's son. He was tall with broad shoulders and thick wavy brown hair he kept disheveled atop his head. His dark eyebrows were bold, set over surprisingly olive green eyes. He grinned at Garnet.

“Garnet, darling, this is my dear old friend, Shari, her husband, Briggand, and their son, Liam,” Lady Hilda leaned in close to Garnet. “Liam is only two years your senior.”

The Queen looked to her aunt in exasperation before smiling politely at the family. “So wonderful to meet you. And thank you for being here tonight. I’m glad my Aunt Hilda has friends such as you.”

“Well,” Hilda grinned, looking between everyone. “Since the party’s just started, Liam why don’t you kick the festivities off and treat the Queen here to a proper dance!”

“What are you doing?” Garnet whispered.

“Oh, you can thank me tomorrow morning, dear,” Hilda pat her cheek delicately.

Liam smiled and his teeth were quite pearly in the milky moonlight. He offered his hand forward. Garnet stared at it hesitantly and pursed her lips. She felt as if she didn’t really have a choice, so she reached forward and took his hand. It felt so... different. Zidane’s hands had always been calloused. It wasn’t an unpleasant sensation for him to touch her, however. She rather liked the roughness of his hands. It made him so real, so imperfect... so



human. But Liam's hand was smooth, devoid of any blemishes or proof of hard work. When they took foot to the dance floor, people cleared a path for them, hooting and hollering as their dance partners continued to swing them about. Liam pressed his hand to the small of Garnet's back, pulling her in close to him.

"It's nice to formally meet you, Your Majesty," Liam said as they fell into beat with the music. "Lady Hilda has told us much about you. You know, my father has been on the regent's elite council for decades. They go very far back."

"That's nice," Garnet replied politely. "Regent Cid could use all the help he can get."

"I'm part of the Lindblum Castle's airship crew. It's amazing the technological innovations the regent is able to imagine. It's hard for me to even picture it as I'm assembling it. But the moment the gears start working, it all makes sense."

"Wow, I bet that's quite exciting work," Garnet smiled. "I've always been very fascinated by the world of airships."

"Oh, you're in for a treat!" Liam laughed. "My father says I'm a windbag when you get me going

on airships.”

“Excuse me, mind if I cut in?”

The duo abruptly stopped moving and looked to the man beside them. It was Blank, still in costume, his face powdered for the stage lights. “And you are?” Liam cocked an eyebrow up.

“This is my friend, Blank,” Garnet said, reaching out to touch his arm. “He just played Prince Schneider in the performance. Do you mind, Liam?”

The young man tilted his lips back and forth, but this time he was the one without a choice. He nodded to Blank and saw himself away from the scene. Blank, however, was not interested in dancing. Instead, he gestured for Garnet to follow him. Together, they left the bustling dance floor and migrated through the throngs of people helping themselves to the food. They walked beyond the light of the party, descending into the dark and quiet garden. He stopped abruptly with his back to Garnet. The Queen ran her hands along the vibrant hedges.

“Blank, I’m glad you sought me out,” Garnet said quietly over the chirping cicadas. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you. But first I’d like to tell you well done

for your performance this evening. It meant the world to me that you came.”

“Yeah, well, the band was gonna drag me here kicking and screaming, anyway,” Blank now turned towards her. “I wanted to make a request.”

“I’m listening,” Garnet nodded.

“Put the searches back on.”

“Blank, I...”

“If it’s Beatrix you’re worried about, I’ll head the search. Beatrix can stay here and do what she needs to. If it’s the strain of taxes, you don’t even have to pay me, I’ll go alone,” Blank pressed his hand to his chest. “All I want from you is an airship and some supplies. Please, Dagger, call the searches back on.”

“You know more than anything I want to find him, too, Blank,” Garnet’s heart thundered in her chest. “And I am willing to consider your request—”

“What’s happened to you?” Blank shook his head. “A year ago, you were willing to break all the rules. This is Zidane we’re talking about. Why are we even hesitating?”

“Well, you certainly cannot go alone,” Garnet shook her head and the sterling charms of her

headpiece jingled. ‘That’s out of the question. Give me some time, Blank. If you want resources, I need the courtesy of a few days. As Queen, I have rightful paths I must take. I cannot go around giving our airship and supplies out on my own accord. There are channels.’ Garnet watched the still man for a moment. “Stay here in Alexandria. I can offer you a room here at the castle.”

“Just tell me when it’s time for something to be done,” Blank said, walking away. He paused, however. “And just remember, Dagger: every moment counts when someone’s missing.”

Blank left after that, leaving Garnet alone in the dark garden. Distantly, the glowing of torches emanated over the bushes and the howls, hoots, and band continued on with no signs of slowing. Garnet sighed, seating herself on the marble ledge. Her heart hammered in her chest. Could she let this happen? It was dangerous on the Outer Continent. Garnet worried Blank was not prepared and didn’t understand the true essence of what the landscape offered. There were large beasts out there. It was excruciatingly hot and there were long stretches of barrenness, reminding her of how absolutely alone she was in the entire world. Did she once again want to cling to hope? Did she really want to give another

go? Her heart was so swollen with hurt. How could Blank want to keep prodding it? She understood, though. She hoped he realized that. Zidane being gone was simply unacceptable in her mind. But what could more could they do than scour the lands and cry in the nighttime? Garnet knew in her heart it's what she wanted to do, but the anguish the plagued her wanted to try healing instead of digging into the wound.

Garnet sighed, burying her face into her hands.

## Chapter Four

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*Author's Notes: Long live Morrid!*

### Chapter Four

A warm beam of light came across his face and he pinched his eyebrows together, trying to turn away from it. His neck ached terribly and it ricocheted down his tired body. He twisted against the soft cotton beneath him and writhed for a moment as he became caught in a blanket. His entire body radiated in pain and he gasped sharply, as if he was emerging from water. Zidane shot forward, confronted by the sight of a brick wall with crumbling adobe. Pictures of people hung on the wall and ivy leaves from ceiling hanging pots dangled down around him. Beside the bed he sat on, there was a round window that displayed a green and majestic view of surrounding mountains and pastures. The sill was covered in trinkets that had been collected from all over the continent. Zidane recognized a tourist token from a Lindblum Air Cab station and a mini replica of the Red Rose airship that was sold at artisan booths in Alexandria. As he looked around the small cabin, that was modest with

a kitchen and table for two, it felt as if Zidane's heart was in fast forward yet his mind was in slow motion. Where was he? Why was everything in his mind so fuzzy? What had happened? He began to sit forward, but he groaned, pressing a hand to his chest. Zidane ground his teeth together and lifted his white undershirt. The left side of his chest and shoulder were wrapped. The bandages were faintly red in some spots. Zidane's entire body was in so much pain that it prevented him from moving anymore. Zidane breathed heavily, slumped forward against his knees. Again, he looked around the cabin and very intently analyzed the surrounding lands. His mind was so bogged down and foggy from the pain and relative disassociation, Zidane couldn't process where he was. The small cabin offered no clues, either. The meager counter space was cluttered with bags of coffee and tediously stacked mugs. A small brick stove puffed nearby with dwindling charred wood. The table had a forgotten cup of coffee on it, plus a half-eaten bagel. Someone had been here recently. Who had been watching over him? Zidane's mind reeled as the faces of his friend came back to him. Zidane fell against the headboard, his chest rising and falling heavily. He applied pressure to his wound as it throbbed bitterly in his shoulder. Where were his friends? Were they safe?

Had they gotten away from the Iifa Tree before it was too late? Zidane craned his neck to spy the calendar on the wall, but it was too far away to see the month. He noticed at the foot of the bed all of his gear was stacked together. His daggers had been polished. His clothes had been folded. His backpack seemed orderly.

Zidane began trying to pull himself from the bed again when the front door swung open. The young man paused, his eyes wide open. An elderly man with a few logs in hand came into the house. He was short with crooked posture. His gray hair was faded and wispy, peaking out from beneath his brown cap. A green cloak covered his wiry shoulders, a bushy mustache bristling from his large nose. “Holy mackerel, you’re awake!” The man’s raspy and airy voice rang out. Quickly, he closed the door behind him, carelessly dropping the wood beside the stove. ‘Don’t try moving, young man. Your stitches are still healing.’ The man crossed towards Zidane, easing him back against the headboard. “Would you like some coffee? You seem a little stiff.” Zidane only stared at the old man with wide intense eyes. “I’ll make you a cup. Something warm will do you good. It’s been a chilly spring!” He went to the counter, pouring himself some water from a clay jug.



“Did you... say spring?” Zidane tilted his head towards the man. “What year is it?”

“Why, it’s 1801, son.”

“What?” Zidane sat forward again but his body protested it. “1801? What day is it?”

“Oh, well, hm,” The old man set a pot of water atop the burning stove, throwing a log in as well. He gave it a tender tap before fumbling inside his coat to reveal gold bifocals. ‘It’s... January 4th.’ Zidane blinked rapidly. It was already time for Dagger’s birthday again? How had so many months passed, yet it felt as if it simply didn’t happen? Zidane felt in that moment very lost and incomplete. “Y’know,” The old man clucked, poking the logs again and sending embers about. “You’re quite the hard sleeper. You came wonderin’ out of the woods over yonder just at the beginning of September. You were very rough lookin’, like you’d been fighting for your life for days. It’s amazing I was even able to drag you back here, I’ve got bad knees.”

Zidane shifted on the bed, grounding his teeth together. “I’ve been here this whole time?”

“Just sleepin’,” The old man nodded, watching the pot of water attentively. ‘From a sleep that long,

I reckoned it'd been a while since you had a good rest. Gave the town-folk a good scare, too.' He smiled in a good natured way. "I was like you in my youth, too. Always lookin' for adventure. But you shouldn't push yourself so hard, son. You gotta live with that body for the rest of your life." The old man grabbed a mug from the cluttered counter and dipped it into the pot. Pockets of steam lifted into the air as the man added the coffee. As he shifted through his silverware, he glanced to Zidane. "My name's Morrid, by the way. I've lived here for the past three decades. I track and chart the night sky."

Zidane hugged his throbbing torso. "Where's 'here'?"

"A small quaint little village," Morrid said with his back to Zidane as he stirred the coffee. He took a waft, genuinely pleased by the smell. He then brought the mug to Zidane. "A little place called Dali."

"Dali?" Zidane echoed, cradling the mug against him and looking out the window. Suddenly, it all began to make sense in Zidane's mind. "I've been here before. Actually... it wasn't too long ago that I had passed through."

“We don’t get many visitors,” Morrid eased himself into a chair to drink his own coffee. “And when we do, it’s typically trouble. It’s been quiet ever since the war ended.”

“The nations are at peace again?” Zidane settled against the pillow and sipped his coffee. The warmth of the drink seeped into his achy bones and the rich flavor nearly made his tongue tickle.

“For the past few months, yes,” Morrid nodded. ‘At least the papers aren’t reporting tragedy every day. In fact, all the papers do now is gossip about the new ruler of Alexandria, Queen Garnet. She’s got quite a role to fill and a lot of work to do.’ Zidane paused, his lips hovering a few inches from the mug. “I’m not one to gossip, though. She sounds like a good kid.” Morrid sipped his coffee, relishing in his favorite drink. “You never told me your name, son. What do you call yourself?”

Zidane was quiet, looking back out the window again. Just beyond the glass, it was familiar territory. He had been away from the comfort of his home, the place he felt he had belonged, for quite some time. Returning had come at a shock to Zidane. That very question stewed an internal conflict inside of him. It had been so long since he’d been awake and

yet the world had just kept on going. Life continued as normal despite the feeling of being completely unhinged from the passage of time. After everything he had been through, faced, and confronted, Zidane could only ask himself the same question: who was he? What did he call himself? An Angel of Death...? A wayward tumble weed? The tempter of fate, maybe. Or the answer to chaos. Zidane pursed his lips.

“You can just call me Zeke...” He replied after a moment.

“Well, Zeke, do you have any family? I imagine someone’s worried sick about you. You look so young,” Morrid peered at him from across the room. “Is there someone I can write to?”

Zidane only shook his head, watching the steam rise from his coffee. “I don’t have any family.”

“All alone in this world?” Morrid cocked his bushy eyebrows up. “Well, that’s downright wrong. A young man such as yourself should have more going on for him other than that. Where’re you from, son? Where were you comin’ from all those months ago?”

Zidane looked to Morrid. “Everything’s still a foggy, I’m sorry.”

“I shouldn’t be pesterin’ you so much,” Morrid turned his attention on his mug.

The room was quiet for a moment as Zidane still reeled. “Is Cid still the Regent of Lindblum?” Zidane asked.

“Of course he is,” Morrid nodded. “Lindblum even has an heir now. Lots of people were beginnin’ to think Lady Hilda’s nephew would have to step up.”

“An heir?” Zidane echoed. “Regent Cid and Lady Hilda had a baby?”

Morrid grinned. “Awake after four months and already itchin’ to know what the tabloids say, huh?”

Zidane tried to smile weakly, but it felt insincere. “I’m sorry... the last I remember of the world, there was mist everywhere and a dark power looming overhead.”

Morrid laughed politely. “No baby, actually. It’s a kid they adopted, she’s called Lady Eiko. A fierce Mage from my understanding. But I don’t understand powers and realms such as that.”

Zidane blinked rapidly, turning his attention back out the window. Eiko? The heir to Lindblum? *Lady*? Was it his Eiko? Of course it had to be, how many children could possibly be named Eiko *and* also know Regent Cid? “And Queen Garnet... what do the tabloids say of her?”

“Oh, the same as usual,” Morrid sighed as he stood, heading towards the stove to refill his mug. ‘The world still grapples to understand why Alexandria had done and gone through what they did all those months ago... she’s also an unwed ruler. The tabloids get a field day out of that. But she’s having a birthday gala soon, so there’s talk of her gowns and menu choices. I hear rumors that Lord Avon will be put on just like at her sixteenth birthday. The Queen’s a big fan.’ Morrid laughed, turning from the stove. “Now you have me gossin’!”

Zidane offered another weak grin before lowering his eyes. Much more had changed than he had anticipated. But then again, he was still reeling to grasp the concept that he had been missing from the world for the better part of a year. Everyone had had time to come to terms with what had happened. For him, though, it was all still fresh, like it had only happened the other day. His friends must have all

accepted that he had perished. They had probably already mourned him and hurried back to regular life as any means to offset the terror and turmoil they had been through. Zidane couldn't help but feel immensely guilty in that moment. In a way, it had been all Zidane's fault that things had spiraled the way they did. The situation got out of control, quickly, and he would never forgive himself for putting people like Dagger, Vivi, and Steiner through hell. He had promised Dagger he would return, but now he wasn't certain he could. Not after what had happened. How could he face her again and not feel awful for everything? Someone could have died and it would have been all on him. But his hands weren't clean. Tormented demons and inner anguish would follow them like a dark cloud of impending rain. Zidane was convinced he was the cloud. They deserved clear skies.

"I got some cabbage and potatoes boilin'," Morrid said, interrupting Zidane's train of thought. "A hearty meal will do you some good. Now that you're awake, it's time to get you back into working order."

Zidane watched the old man for a moment before nodding. "I'll be out of your hair soon."

Every day, Zidane only devoted himself to getting better. Each morning began rather painfully. His biggest obstacle at the moment was sitting up. Even moving his legs around put an awful burden on his spine and muscles. Zidane could only feel frustrated each time his body didn't want to listen. But old and achy Morrid was a patient voice who promised coffee and steamed vegetables were the way to proper healing. By January 7th, Zidane was able to stand from bed. He tired quickly and often had to use the counter or chair for support, but it seemed as the hours waned on, he was getting better and better at walking again. The narrow and small cabin was ample exercise for Zidane who became winded just from fetching himself a cup of coffee. Morrid continued to feed him steamed carrots and lima beans. He brought home the strongest coffee. And still, he kept on being patient with Zidane. On January 9th, Zidane felt well enough that morning to eat his porridge at the table with the old man.

“You know, I’ve devoted my entire life to the night sky,” Morrid told him. “Every night for the past twenty-seven years, I’ve hiked to the top of the observatory and charted the sky. It’s fascinating knowing that some of the stars you’re looking at don’t actually exist anymore. It’s a funny concept,



really. Even with my bad knees, I still go up there. You should come, too, tomorrow night. If my calculations are right, and I know they are, we'll have an unobstructed view of an asteroid storm."

"That's a lot of stairs," Zidane shook his head.

"Come on, Zeke, I've been around the sun far more times than you have."

The next morning, Morrid was able to coax Zidane outside to the spacious front yard. He cocked his head back to look at the sizable cliff that towered beside Morrid's modest cabin. "Take in that fresh country air!" Morrid said, stepping into the sunlight. "I have some apple trees just beyond the gate here, let's go get some. We can make a pie to have for the asteroid shower." Zidane's hips were still somewhat frail and his gait was awkward as he followed after Morrid.

"Do you always make pies and watch shooting stars?" Zidane asked, pacing his breath.

"Coffee, too, yes," Morrid nodded, pausing to bend over and grab a wicker basket. He then pushed his gate open towards the pastures with tall lush blades of grass. Just across the plain, Zidane spied Dali. A gust of air brushed his hair across his

forehead and he continued after Morrid. ‘What a treat it is to have a tall young man to reach the finer apples for me. The pie will be the best it ever was. And perhaps the asteroids will burn bright.’ Morrid grinned to himself and stopped abruptly, pointing ahead of them. “There’s the first tree. And the apples are nice and red. They’re perfect.”

Zidane reached upward, his left shoulder searing in pain. He plucked an apple down, examining it in his palm. “Did you do this with your family?”

Morrid pulled his own apple down, shining it against his cloak. “I don’t have any family, either. I’m just like you.”

Zidane’s grip tightened on the apple. “But did you... ever have people you considered family in your life?”

The old man bit into his apple, taking his time to chew it and inspect the interior. “I consider you my family, Zeke.”

Zidane pursed his lips, placing his apple in the basket. He reached again despite the pain, snagging another. “You’ve lived a long life, Morrid. Didn’t you have parents? Or... a wife?”

“As time has gone on, it’s been easier to let those memories go adrift,” Morrid told him. He continued to only eat his apple as Zidane worked at plucking the fruit and filling the basket. “My mother died thirty-nine years ago, my father... it’s been even longer. I had a wife, too. Two kids.”

“Where are they all now?” Zidane paused.

“They’re all dead,” Morrid told him very simply. “You see, we used to live in the village. This was twenty some-odd years ago, mind you... it was much different than it is today. Our village was raided in the middle of the night. It was a grim massacre, random at that. They took many valuables and were unpredictable in their means to kill. My family was a victim of that cruel fate. Worst part, we didn’t even know who did it. To this day, it’s a political topic that enrages the community, it divides them even more. That is why I moved here after it happened. My family is buried in these lands and I must stay close. But I want to be left alone.”

It was very quiet between the two men. The pleasant spring breeze came between them. Zidane watched Morrid very carefully before bowing his head. “I’m very sorry, Morrid.”

“Well,” Morrid took another hearty bite of his apple. “Now that I’ve told you a little somethin’, why don’t you tell me about yourself?”

“I was raised in Lindblum,” Zidane told him, placing another apple in the basket. “I was... an aspiring actor, I guess you could say.”

“Hm,” Morrid raised a bushy eyebrow. “I’m guessin’ that didn’t happen.”

Zidane grinned weakly, dangling the basket at his side. “No, that didn’t happen. Life got in the way... I fell in love...”

“Ah, that’ll do it,” Morrid laughed. “Your entire life comes to a screeching halt just for one lady.”

Zidane started back up the path with the old man behind him. Zidane sighed. “Yeah, that’s sorta what it felt like.”

“So? It didn’t work out?”

Zidane paused as he pushed through the gate at Morrid’s property. He could hear the squawk of birds perched on the abrupt cliff side. The spring air was somewhat rejuvenating. It was a beautiful season on the Mist Continent. Zidane looked over

his shoulder at Morrid. “No, it can’t work out. We’re just two completely different people.”

Morrid clapped his hand to the back of Zidane’s shoulder. “Well, that’s alright, son. Like they say, there’s plenty of Cactaur in the desert. You’ll find a lady whose right for you.”

Yeah, right, was all Zidane could think in his head as they returned to the cabin.

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The two men spent the afternoon in the cabin with inadequate counter space making pie dough was scratch, rolling it, kneading it, and finely laying it into a dish. The apples were dressed in melted butter and cinnamon, some nutmeg by Morrid’s request. As the two worked together laying strips of dough across the top, Zidane laughed. “You know, this is my first time ever making a pie.”

“I’ve done it too many times to count,” Morrid grinned, tediously adjusting one of his dough strips. “My wife was a baker. An artisan of all things cakes and biscuits. Oh, I weighed so much when I lived with that woman.”

Zidane dusted his flour-covered hands off over the wash basin as Morrid took the apple pie to the stove. “What was your wife’s name?”

“Camellia,” Morrid said, coming to wash his hands, too. “She was as delicate as one, as well. What about you? What was your sweethearts name?”

“Uh... Dagger...”

“Dagger, huh? That’s an interesting name,” Morrid laughed and set about making himself a cup of coffee. “With a name like that, she sounds a little rough around the edges.”

“A diamond in the rough, so to say...” Zidane eased himself into a chair and took a long-winded breath. “I don’t know if I can do all those stairs, Morrid.”

“Oh, you’ll be fine,” Morrid shook his head, setting a hot mug down in front of Zidane. “I’m not eating apple pie alone up there and if I eat apple pie down here with you, then I won’t get to see the asteroids!”

“When is the last time you even had someone over for apple pie and asteroids?” Zidane furrowed his brow.

“That’s why you must go,” Morrid gave him a playful whack with a tea towel. ‘These asteroid showers only come around these parts every twelve years. What a way to welcome you back, Zeke. An asteroid shower reminds you that you’re here on this crazy planet somehow.’ Zidane lowered his eyes for a moment. “I think you could use a little reminder, young man.”

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“Twenty-nine down, only seventy-seven to go, come on,” Morrid said. On one arm dangled a wicker basket, filled with their apple pie, dishes, and cups for coffee. ‘The trick is to get into a steady pattern.’ The old man continued as he advanced a few steps in front of the winded Zidane. “You’re far too young to be *this* out of shape.”

“I’m not... out of shape,” Zidane panted. The cool breeze was welcomed the further he climbed. His skin was sticky from exertion. “I’m injured...”

“Yes, well,” Morrid clucked, shifting the wicker basket to his other arm. “We’re getting you all straightened out. You looked like you’d been in an airship crash.”

“Yeah...” Zidane lifted his head. “That probably would have been better, actually.”

“Come on, now, we must hurry!” Morrid called. Zidane let out a sigh, forcing himself to go forward. “You’re more than half-way now, you can’t give up. Going down will be easier.”

“Sure, ’cause I’ll ride my face down the whole way,” Zidane snorted. “You know, I didn’t used to be this helpless. *I* used to be the person who helped you.”

“Funny how that shifts, huh?” Morrid said. “Now keep climbin’!”

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Zidane found himself sitting on the cliffs edge, intensively watching the sky. He nearly missed his mouth with the apple pie. The asteroids were incredibly beautiful as they burst across the skies in purples and blues. Morrid was ever so enamored by them, too. He had probably seen the event dozens of times over, but it was easy to tell the thrill of them never waned. The asteroids careened through the sky, disappearing beyond the mountain ranges. They dissipated in the direction of Alexandria. Zidane



looked across the distance, almost longingly, the shooting stars illuminating his glassy eyes.

“Thinkin’ about your sweetheart?” Morrid nudged his knees. “The asteroids will do that to you.”

“Do you still think about your wife?” Zidane asked, his eyes glued to the mountains that separated him from Alexandria.

“Every time,” Morrid nodded.

“I just...” His blond hair fell to frame his face as he dangled his head, apple pie filling his vision. “I don’t know if I’m making the right decision. We could still be together. I’ve spent so much time doing anything to make her see that I’m adequate but after all this time... I don’t think I’m good for her, Morrid. She’s important. She’s got things to do and see and take care of. But me? I’m a vagabond. Always have been, always will be...”

“But if she loves you and you love her... nothing else should be able to stop you two,” Morrid shook his head.

“I’m sorry, Morrid, but I truly can’t make you understand,” Zidane was visibly frustrated.

“Well, what are you going to do about it?” Morrid asked, watching the asteroids attentively. “Are you going to let your past dictate your future? Who cares what happened in the past? Make peace with it. You’re always becoming a new version of yourself. You can’t beat yourself up over who you were in the past. You couldn’t have known what you know now.”

“I wish it was that easy,” Zidane set his pie aside, slumping his shoulders. “She’s probably better off without me, anyway.”

“And who are you going to let decide that? The world or yourself?”

“I haven’t seen her in so long,” Zidane drew his knees to his chest and hugged them. “She’s probably doing just fine... she’s always just wanted to take care of herself.”

“That’s how you’re gonna leave it?” Morrid shook his head. “You’re not even gonna go see for yourself? You said you had no family. Why would you turn your back on someone who probably cares about you, Zeke?”

Zidane furrowed his brow and pursed his lips. “‘Cause I’m trouble. Always have been.”

“Oh, to be a melodramatic teenager again,” Morrid smiled at the sky. “You’re over thinking it, son. Life isn’t so black and white. There is no direct line between good and evil. Nobody is the bad guy in their own narrative. Just like every heroes actions aren’t for righteousness. The worlds a big place, Zeke. A cruel and unforgiving one at that. But if you find a little pocket of good somewhere in this world... you have to hold onto it. You gotta fight for it.”

“But how do you know when to stop?” Zidane shook his head. “How do you know when it’s been enough?”

“When you’re at peace with it,” Morrid told him. “And I can see, son, you’ve got a long way to go.”

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That night, Zidane dreamed vividly of the asteroid storm. And in those dreams, he saw Dagger. She was there amongst the belting stars and milky star fragments. She was glimmering with the asteroids, reaching towards him, but they were always just out of touch. Zidane was sweating profusely when he awoke and Morrid promptly brought him some coffee. Zidane’s dark and tired

eyes stared at the calendar seeing it was January 11th. He was quiet as the steam stuck to his chin. Morrid was shuffling about, preparing a breakfast of left over apple pie and cream.

“Morrid,” Zidane said evenly. His eyes remained on the calendar, but he heard Morrid stop sifting through the dish rack. “I think I should be leaving soon.”

Morrid found the fork he was fishing for, setting the pie slices on the table. “The asteroids spoke to you, didn’t they?”

“For the first time since I’ve come back to myself... I dreamed about her last night. I saw her face.”

“Where are you headed?” Morrid seated himself at the table. Zidane pulled himself from bed stiffly, coming to join the old man. He held his mug close.

“Alexandria. I’ll find her at the birthday gala.”

“And what will you say to her?”

“Nothing, for the time being,” Zidane shook his head. “I just want to see her.”

“Well, it’s a start,” Morrid smiled, pushing a plate towards Zidane. “But to Alexandria... you’d have to

leave today to make it in time.”

“I’ll be ready after breakfast. Just need to wash my face. Somehow my coin purse is still in my backpack so I’ll stop in town for a few things before I go,” Zidane said, helping himself to his food. ‘It’s really important I lay eyes on her. This is my one true chance.’ Zidane paused before putting his fork in his mouth. “I can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done for me, Morrid. Giving me a comfortable bed, feeding me... endless coffee. I promise I’ll bring you coffee from every place I go.”

“I see it as my redemption,” Morrid told him. “I couldn’t save my own son, but now, I’ve saved someone else’s.”

The older man and the younger man continued to have a pleasant breakfast together. They laughed and joked as if they’d known each for a lifetime, yet it had only been seven days since Zidane’s awakening. But Morrid watched over Zidane’s still body for nearly three seasons. He gave him water and washed him. Zidane was eternally indebted to this man. It was almost as if he had just received a lovely grandfather. When breakfast finished, Zidane suited up into his gloves and boots, slipping his daggers on his waist.

“Take this, in case it rains,” Morrid held a black hooded cloak out towards Zidane. “Might be helpful if the rumors are true and its a garden party.”

Zidane grinned. “I’ll give you the truth if the tabloids don’t.” Morrid, of course, thrust a container of coffee into his backpack, too, and together the men walked out to the beautiful sunshine and cerulean blue skies. Zidane took in a deep breath of the sweet country air. He took a few steps forward but stopped, his cloak brushing against his thighs. “Morrid, I have one more thing to tell you.”

“What’s that, son?”

“I... lied to you about my real name,” He said very slowly. Morrid’s face did not move, however. “I don’t know why it was my first instinct, but... my name is Zidane. Zidane Tribal.”

Morrid grinned. “You’re much more clever than you think you are.”

Zidane blinked. “What?”

“Your first instinct was to gather intel. You wanted to know what the tabloids said. So I started bringing them home for you. You saw your real name in there, I know you did. I read the same articles,” Morrid was almost chuckling now. “You

were playing it safe this whole time. Why wouldn't you want Queen Garnet to know you're alive after all, Zidane?"

"Wow, you're a lot more privy than I thought, too," Zidane sheepishly rubbed the nape of his neck. "Look, I don't know what the hell is going on, but I'm going with my gut feeling on this. I've been gone for a long time and if I see the world's a better place..." Zidane shook his head. "I just want to see everything from an outside perspective. A lot has happened, Morrid. A lot that I haven't even confronted or processed. My friend's might be better off without me crawling back to them."

"Son," Morrid stepped towards him, placing a hand to his shoulder. "You have yet another journey in front of you. You must find out who you are and what you want to be. They are often two very different things. I have faith you can do it. Just remember: don't forget who you are... or why you're here, alright?"

"Thank you, Morrid," Zidane said softly, giving the man a hug. Morrid laughed, patting him on the back. As Zidane pushed the gate open, he turned and waved. "I'll write."

“Just send coffee!” The old man called back from his shaded porch.



# Chapter Five

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## Chapter Five

It was well after eight o'clock when Zidane arrived in Alexandria. As he walked through the iron wrought entrance, he deftly pulled his hood up, tucking his blond hair back. Zidane kept his head low as he wandered down the familiar cobblestone path. It was dark between the streetlights. Distantly, frogs croaked in the alleys. It was relatively deserted in town. Only a few young kids gathered on front door stoops and some staggering drunkard lovers darted amongst the shadows in fits of giggles. As Zidane came into the dark marketplace plaza, he gazed above the red thatched rooftops, spying the emanation of lights and faint sounds of drums and celebrations. Across the plaza he heard the chime of a bell and spied a crowd of loud people funneling out the door. They were laughing and chatting as they began towards the stairs for the castle. Zidane walked rapidly in their wake, buttoning his cloak shut. He stood on the fringe of the group who were too busy with a night of partying to pay mind to him. Zidane blended in just well enough to cross on

the gondola unsuspected. He kept his eyes on his boots as they awaited the small boat.

“I heard Queen Garnet is wearing the *same* dress from her last birthday,” One of the girls said as she rouged her cheeks. “I know she’s had a lot going on in her life, but you’d think a Queen would make time to have a dress tailored for herself.”

“Elsa told me that a bunch of Duke’s and Duchesses from Lindblum and Treno are taking their sons to the party to ‘further alliances with the kingdom’,” Another snorted as she did air quotes.

“I’m not afraid to go on the dance floor elbows swingin’ to get a chance to dance with babe-ilicious Garnet,” A boy laughed, thrashing about in an intoxicating manner.

The girl paused from applying her make up, melodramatically rolling her eyes at the snickering boys. “Anyway, I’m really glad Queen Garnet grew her hair back out. She isn’t very cute with short hair.”

“Oh, did you see what she was wearing when she did that public appearance at the new Girl’s Preparatory?” Her friend grinned excitedly. “My little sister was there and said Queen Garnet has the

newest crimson red leather high boots by Bernie. They were adorable, of course.”

“Ugh, of course,” The other girl slipped her hand mirror back into her purse.

Finally, the gondola emerged from the night, bobbing on the moon itself. The girls climbed in while Zidane sneaked just onto the far end, opposite of the operating Knight of Pluto. With his black cloak, he felt confident he would evade any concern. Zidane peaked out from beneath his hood, peering around a girl’s shoulder to see the Alexandrian Castle growing in sight. It seemed so festive with the banners and flags. A nice cool breeze came over Zidane and he had to grab his hood from falling back. It seemed as if the party had only begun. It was so full of energy. A tall looming figure caught his attention in the background and his heart hammered in his chest. It looked just like the Prima Vista. Was Tantalus here? Zidane lowered his eyes, his breathing shallowing. The boat bumped the edge of the sloped marble steps and Zidane was quick to remain side by side with the departing passengers. He broke away from them quickly. They went for the bar, Zidane pushed himself between two tables of food, disappearing into the garden. He weaved through it despite not knowing where he was going.

He only wanted a quiet spot to collect himself. It was much more overwhelming than he thought. The intricate footwork they did on the dance floor, the music, and plates of food— it was all so familiar, like the home he had missed. It had been gone for so long, though, he didn't know how to receive it anymore. Morrid was right. He didn't really understand who he was. And if he couldn't be himself, what would his friends think of him? Zidane ground his teeth together from the nonsensical roundabouts in his head. He was a basket case. Nobody in their right minds would be happy to see him this way.

Frustrated in his thoughts, Zidane came sharply around the corner of a hedge, but found himself back pedaling silently. Someone was having their own time-out in the back dark corner of the garden. Quietly, Zidane brought his head around the corner, keeping his hood pulled down. It was a thin girl with a white dress that nearly glowed in the milky moonlight. She was pressed against the marble ledges of the windy garden, leaves and roses dangling around her wiry body. Her full skirt crumpled around her, almost like a balloon. She let out a long sigh, pulling her hands down from covering her face. She tilted her head, looking to the

sky. That's when the shadows fell across her face just right. Zidane felt himself go cold. It was Garnet. He felt his heart thundering in his chest and he knelt as a rush of blood came up to his head. He could hear in the distance the beats of drums, the hoots and hollers of those enjoying a pleasant spring evening, yet here was the birthday girl all by herself, tucked into the foliage, as if to hide from it all. That seemed so wrong to Zidane. She should have been in the spotlight being celebrated for the wonderful person she was. He pursed his lips as he watched her sigh again and slump her shoulders. His body urged him to move, to go towards her. Zidane only wanted to take all of her hurt away and scoop her familiar body into his arms. Yet, something still held him back.

In the next beat, he heard footsteps and Zidane withdrew further behind the hedge. Barely peaking out from beneath his hood, he spied a young man with floppy brown hair emerge. Zidane watched him with intense hard eyes, pushing the hedge back for a better view. He was dressed in an olive green velvet shirt with long sleeves embroidered in golds. His dark slacks complimented his height. "Garnet," He said gently. 'Are you alright? Your friend, Blank, said you needed some thinking space.' Garnet pursed her lips, looking to the man. She was doing

everything in her power not to burst into tears. “It’s your birthday, Your Majesty. You shouldn’t have to deal with business tonight. Whatever your friend needed can wait until you’ve refreshed from the party. Come on, the chilled wine is being delivered. You deserve to have fun. Your Aunt Hilda is growing impatient, too.”

“I’m sorry,” Garnet replied in her soft melodious voice. It nearly tore Zidane’s heart into two. He had dreamed about that voice for so long. And the lyrics of her song had played endlessly in his head, fervently, like a fever. Having her so close again shook him to his utter core. “Unfortunately it’s not a job where you’re ever off duty.”

“This is just one evening,” The man grinned, placing his gloved hand to Garnet’s bare shoulder. “Everyone who has business with you is here, anyway, having a great time. We should, too.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Garnet nodded, dipping her head. Her onyx locks fell around her slender face, making Zidane’s heart race. “I can’t fix everything, anyway.”

“There is nothing to be fixed on your birthday, Your Majesty,” He held his hand out towards her. She was very slow to accept it, coming to her feet.

Her dress furled around her, a magnificent ball gown, and one Zidane realized he recognized. “I’ll tell you what’s to be fixed, however; the left engine of Regent Cid’s new *Blue Rose* airship.”

“Oh, now this is the gossip I’d like to hear, Liam,” Garnet smiled. “Do tell how he envisions to out-do my castle’s *Red Rose*.”

Liam linked arms with Garnet in the next moment and they left. Her heels became quieter and quieter with each pace away. Zidane bit down on his lip, sliding onto the ground. Miserably, he stretched his legs out, uncomfortably cocking his head against the marble ledge. Above him, the stars glimmered. He knew Morrid was most likely at his perch, peering through his telescope, and making notes. And yet, here Zidane was, laying on the ground like a fool at the Alexandrian Castle. What had he expected? For all he knew, that was Garnet’s husband. He was too late. Zidane squeezed his eyes shut, cursing beneath his breath. He felt like the biggest idiot ever. He had missed out on his once in a lifetime opportunity. And what had it all been for? Zidane clenched his teeth together, sitting forward. Kuja had only done the same thing he had done to his friends all those months ago: sent them away. Now, he had to pay the price.

After sitting there like a fool for a few more minutes, Zidane decided to keep looking around. Where was Steiner? Or Beatrix? Even their friends? Was Tantalus here? Was Blank? He was quiet in his step, moving forward with his cloak concealing him amongst the slanted shadows of the garden. The plaza on the waterfront was bursting with light and he paused just meters from the edge of it. He couldn't go in there. Someone would see his face or recognize him. He felt his tail tense against his back. Zidane went further into the shadows, pressing himself to the hedges that bordered the party. He saw through the intricate web of twigs the movement and music of the party. Everyone was dining like kings and dancing like the merriest men in the world. It wasn't too long ago the world had been clouded with self-doubt and anxiety. Now, there wasn't a care to be found as women were flung around the dance floor, their skirts sailing up around their thighs. Zidane paused, his breath hitching in his throat, as he scanned the crowd. There was Vivi and Steiner on the outskirts of the crowd, near the water. He must have walked right by them with his tunnel vision to disappear. He had entered this castle like a ghost, it seemed. Steiner and Vivi were caught in what looked to be an invigorating conversation. Zidane shifted through the twigs quietly, hoping not



to disturb nearby diners. Freya was crouched down not too far away from the previous duo. She had chosen not to wear a hat that night and her ashen hair glowed in the torch light. She was wearing a light yellow coat with fluffy cuffs and was busy fixing a pearl clip snapped into Eiko's long hair. Eiko seemed so much older in her fine clothes. Cheering the dancers on were Lady Hilda, swishing a glass of red wine dangerously close to her gown. She dangled swimmingly off of Regent Cid's arm as they watched with smiles as Liam and Garnet took up the center of the floor. Zidane pursed his lips, feeling as if his heart was being crumpled like parchment in his chest.

Beyond the dance floor, though, Zidane spied through the throngs of moving bodies, a table occupied by Tantalus. Blank had his head in his hand, his eyes fixated on his empty plate like it was the most interesting thing in the world. He stewed in his mind, completely absent from the laughter of Ruby, Cinna, and Marcus. The trio drank their wine and passed around bread baskets of all kinds of marbling. But Blank was motionless. Zidane drew himself away from the hedge, crouching down in the darkness yet again. His cloak rumbled around his bent knees and he sighed, dipping his head. He

didn't know what to do. He was confronted, in that moment, with so many memories with the people beyond the hedges. Life had continued without him and he felt hesitant to jump back in. The sound of fast paced boots caught his attention and he pressed himself deeper in the shadows, watching as General Beatrix whizzed by an aisle. He then heard awful retching. Zidane furrowed his brow as the uneasy sound of vomiting reached his ears. It wasn't long before the clattering of Steiner's armor was heard. Deftly, Zidane darted through the shadows, kneeling on the other side of the hedge from Beatrix. He pinched his face and turned his head away, hearing her throw up just through the branches.

"I brought you some water," Steiner said. Zidane pressed his sticky palms to the cobblestone as his familiar voice rang through his head, as haunting as a drill sergeant.

Beatrix cleared her throat and was quiet a moment. Zidane heard the shifting of her boots to the stone. "You should go back to the party and be with your friends. Your Majesty seems to be in good spirits, too."

"But you are not well," Steiner insisted. "Beatrix, you can't fool around anymore. Your journey to the

Outer Continent was over a month ago and whatever you brought back with you, you can't shake on your own. You need medicine. Tomorrow, please, will you see the doctor in the infirmary? I'll even go with you."

"I can take care of myself," Beatrix seemed exasperated. "I'm fine, Steiner. You needn't worry yourself like you do."

"You know I'm going to worry," Steiner countered. "What's wrong with a second opinion?"

There was the sound of pacing again. Zidane remained tense, ready to zip out of sight in a moments notice. "It would be a waste of the doctor's time, Steiner. It's nothing serious, I promise."

"But how do you know?"

There was silence for a few beats. Zidane looked towards the hedges expectantly. "I have the second-shift of my soldiers in the east and west wings. Your men are in the towers. I believe that will be ample support for tonight's party. They know their orders, to only let the select boarding guests remain. They'll be sure to escort the rest from the premises. I'm going to retire for the night."

"Perhaps I should come with you."

“You should stay and mingle,” Beatrix was quick to reply. “Master Vivi came all the way from the Black Mage Village to be with you tonight.”

“Beatrix...” Steiner’s voice seemed so full of hurt. Zidane heard the sound of Beatrix’s boots walking away. He saw her shadow come across the aisle and he backpedaled silently, pulling his hood down.

“If it will make you happy, Steiner...” She was slow to say. “We’ll see the doctor tomorrow afternoon, after I finish my duties with the birthday brunch for Her Majesty.”

“You will?”

“For you, to ease those nerves? Yes,” Beatrix replied. “Good night, Steiner.” And with that, Zidane watched her shadow bob out of sight, slanting across the next hedge she passed. Zidane was unmoving, listening to Steiner walk a few paces. After a moment, Steiner continued back to the party. Zidane’s heart beat rapidly in his chest as he attempted to piece together the lives of his friends. Vivi lived in Black Mage Village now? Beatrix had gone to the Outer Continent? What for?

Behind him, the drummer beat ferociously against his instrument and the crowd resounded in applause. “Thank you, thank you!” The bag pipe player wailed. “We don’t deserve this kindness! The presentation of a wonderful rendition of *I Want to Be Your Canary* is a hard act to follow, folks! A very happy birthday to Her Majesty, Queen Garnet. Let’s dance some more!” The crowd cheered in response and after a moment, the band kicked off yet again. Zidane returned to the hedge and was nearly startled to see Garnet and Liam at the table directly in front of him, choosing from a variety of wines and champagnes. Liam smiled at the side of the Queen as she chose a delicate flute glass, holding it close to her chest. Zidane felt a weight coming over him. It seemed so wrong of a scenario. Here he was, peering through some brush to look at Garnet, when just months ago, he had been holding her in his arms, doing everything in his power to protect her from the world. But again, he found himself conflicted and Morrid’s advice raced through his mind. *Who you are and who you want to be are two different people.*

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It was nearing midnight and the party was beginning to wane. A few people straggled to finish the rest of their drinks or chow down on one more plate from the fine cooks of Alexandria. Quina helped the cooks clear platters one by one, excited to see leftovers. Guards helped shoo people towards the gondola. After watching Garnet bow to Liam and descend to the castle, stealthily, Zidane merged back into a rowdy drunk crowd and got on the gondola. Luckily, the soldier was too busy asking the patrons to be still to notice the odd man with the tilted head in the cloak. From beneath his hood, Zidane watched the lighted Alexandria Castle grow small as he crossed the wide river. Some maids were already busy swiping linens from tables and sweeping the cobblestone path. Steiner came by to give orders every now and then. Zidane's heart panged in hurt. He was happy to see everyone was relatively okay. He couldn't help but think he'd missed out on so much, though. The boat bobbed against the water as his own mind did against his heart.

Being back in Alexandria was harder than he thought. Zidane watched the ripples dissipate from the boat. From behind, a girl accidentally elbowed him in the back, but he didn't even notice. Zidane

was too wrapped up in his mind to notice anything. The days he spent at Morrid's, all he seemed to desire was to be with the people he had given his heart and life. But now, it all seemed much too difficult. So much time had passed. Everyone seemed to be well on the road to recovery. Zidane didn't think he could make an appearance again with his own wounded heart and undo everyone's undoubtedly hard spent months in recovery from everything that happened. Zidane's entire mind was going for a whirl.

Like a deflated balloon, he bobbed at everyone's heels as he clambered off the gondola. The boisterous crowd of friends began to break apart, wishing each other a good night. Zidane, however, found himself all alone now in the silent marketplace plaza. He let out a long sigh, pushing his hood back on his shoulders. What now? He thought sourly to himself. He turned to spy the top of the Alexandrian Castle, standing tall and proud in all its glory. Zidane ground his teeth together and turned, heading blindly down an alleyway. He steered himself in no general direction, lost in his mind. He glanced about at the quiet and shiny storefront windows. A creaky wooden sign dangling above caught his attention and he stopped in the

dark alleyway, catching the slivers of moonlight fall over a sign for a basement theater playhouse. Zidane glanced towards the stairs leading down, seeing it was also closed. He let out a huff, seating himself on the stairs and pressing his elbows to his knees. He wondered if Ruby still ran the playhouse, arranged the productions, and brainstormed unique cocktails. He also wondered if the band still got together to drink themselves silly. He hoped so.

Distantly, a bell chimed, signaling the top of the hour. Night time was sailing past Zidane. He didn't know where to go, though. The no vacancy signs were plastered in every window because of Queen Garnet's birthday gala. He was not tired, however, and after lingering long enough on the stairs of wading memories, he began walking again. Alexandria had not changed much. The reconstruction had brought life and vibrancy back to the modest kingdom. There were all sorts of fancy tailors and seamstresses. Florist shops sported decadent and intricate bouquets. Artisans displayed their finest works and delis dangled large hunks of meats by the windows to show their premium selection. There wasn't another soul on the streets now as Zidane bobbed about the town like a lost kitten. He felt like he had always had a clue or a



sense of direction just a year ago, but now, he was uncertain of what'd he do or where he'd go. Zidane felt completely out of sorts with no wayward direction. He longed to return to his friends, yet something still held him back. Their lives had all seemed to take of meaningful paths. He felt invisible to them, not even worth their time. But what would he do with himself?

A gust of wind barreled through the alley, blowing Zidane's hood back over his head. He clutched his cloak as it whipped about. As Zidane managed to pull the hood off again, something flapping against a wood post caught his attention. Upon further inspection, he realized it was a flyer that was beginning to lose its tacks. He stared intently at it, his blond bangs falling across his forehead. Pursing his lips, he tore it from the wood post, clutching it between his hands tightly.

*Alexandria Thrives on Heroes  
And Sleeps Soundly with Bravery*

*Enlist Today in the*

*Knights of Pluto!*

Zidane's eyes hovered on the charcoal drawing of the familiar uniform on a thin young man. Zidane

furrowed his brow and glanced towards the night sky. The clustered sanguine sky glittered at him. He had come to realize through Morrid the stars said so much if one would only stop and listen. The night was still again, not another breeze. Zidane looked to the poster once more, wondering if just maybe it was a sign. A purpose. He wouldn't have to be away from his friends, but he would never truly be interfering. Zidane could make sure Garnet was alright. And repay Steiner in some indirect way. Having the work would be good to take his mind off things. And maybe with time... Zidane could learn to feel better again.

*Submit interest at the Gondola Station*  
*8am — 4pm*

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The warm spring sun fell over Zidane's face as the dewy morning cloud cover began to break. Again the bells rang, signifying it was seven in the morning. Zidane rubbed sorely at his neck as he raised his head from his backpack. Not far from him, the canal water lapped against the mossy concrete and the docks just a few feet away were already bustling with men pushing their boats out. In Zidane's hand, the crumpled flyer from the night

before was gripped tightly, as if it was the only tangible part of his destiny. He took in the fishy scent of the docks as he unscrewed the lid of the coffee thermos. He placed the flyer beneath a rock, making a face at the taste of cold coffee. It was better than anything, though. Zidane would need all the energy he could get to grapple with his task that day.

His heart beat rapidly at the idea of enlisting as a Knight of Pluto. His biggest obstacle was how? Zidane couldn't go marching in there as the new recruit. What if it required an interview with the Captain? He slowly licked his lips, watching a few cats stroll the ledge, glancing tentatively at the fishermen. Zidane would just have to go and ask. After drinking a quarter of the thermos, he decided to get moving. Zidane was somewhat stiff as he rose and he gave his clothes a good pat. After a moment, he paused, tugging at his vest. Zidane shrugged out of it to reveal his white undershirt, stuffing the vest into his backpack. He whisked his cloak over his shoulders, pressing his tail to his back.

The streets were alive with energy when just hours before, they were empty and quiet. Men and women alike shouted for their wares. Booth vendors were already busy serving cups of coffee, warm

pastries, and sack lunches for workers in a hurry. The shop windows showed owners and employees sweeping and straightening shelves in preparation for another busy day. Zidane found himself in a crowd of people as he entered the large marketplace. He paused to look at the castle that glowed in the early morning light. Zidane found himself looking between all the vendors. He needed new clothes, anything to make him not seem like himself. Zidane took his time looking over a vendor of long coats, but he ultimately decided it against it. Another vendor sported woolly hats which seemed voluminous and hot for the time of year. Zidane let out a huff, turning on the balls of his feet. He turned to look at a table of hand painted Tetra Cards when a sign just beyond the artists shoulder caught his attention.

A hairdresser shop promising a hair washing, a cut, and anything of one's desire for not many gil. Zidane ran his hands through his hair as he approached the store front. Just inside the window, a woman with curly blond hair piled a top her head was busy polishing a pair of scissors. A haircut, Zidane considered. It would certainly help him cut the uniform better. It would be less suspicious from behind, granted he kept his tail from sight. Before

Zidane had completely thought it through, the bell was ringing as he pushed the door open.

“Good mornin’!” The woman called, flashing a sweet smile. “Welcome to the Honey Salon! You can have yourself a seat here in front of the mirror.”

Zidane felt stiff as he came across the parlor, setting his backpack on the ground. He eased himself into the seat, staring dully at his reflection. It was as if he didn’t even recognize himself. Someone else entirely was staring back at him. The woman brought a white silk blanket around Zidane’s rather rugged travel clothes. She grinned at their reflection, placing her slender hands on his shoulders. “Now you’re a new face! Traveling merchant?” Zidane managed a robotic nod. “Well, more than happy to serve you, mister. What can I do for you? A shampoo to get the dust out? A trim to take the years off?”

Zidane cleared his throat. “Yes, both. And... do you color hair?”

“Color?” She arched her eyebrows, reaching to test the texture of his hair. “What’d you want?”

“Something darker,” Zidane told her. “Something brown.”

“Are you sure?” The hairdresser placed her hands on her hips. “Going dark isn’t really in season right now. Most people come in askin’ for something like yours.”

“I’m not one to really keep with the trends,” Zidane said, pressing himself to the cold leather chair.

“Well, alright,” The woman nodded. “Let me mix a treatment up. You can tell me if you like it. And do you just want your dead ends trimmed?”

“No, I want it short,” Zidane felt rather numb. “Take the ponytail off... layer the rest of it.”

“I can do that,” She grinned, running her hands through his hair again. “Now, let’s get you washed up.”

---

“... the last four months of my trip to Lindblum were useful when I finally was able to contact a book dealer in town with quite the collection,” Vivi explained to Steiner as the two slowly made their rounds through the garden. The maids still worked furiously to get rid of the evidence of such a raging party. Streamers, confetti, even bottles of beer, hung

in the hedges and the floor was littered with crumpled fabrics and linens. Vivi and Steiner found themselves amongst the hedges with blossoming roses bordering them. “I found some books I thought were only part of ancient lore and they had pages intact to read about the type of dark arts behind black magic.”

“Anything useful?” Steiner arched his eyebrows, his hands poised politely behind his back. Steiner and Vivi held a very close relationship following the aftermath of Kuja’s downfall. They felt they truly understood each other. Vivi had been working tirelessly in the past few months to live amongst the Black Mages in the Village and learn more about their creation. His ultimate goal was to figure out a way to extend their lifespans and create a better quality of life. Though Steiner was always very supportive of this goal, at the moment, he seemed to be slightly unavailable, his mind wandering from him.

“More ingredients and resources to get closer to understanding and achieving these powers,” Vivi nodded. When Steiner didn’t reply, the Mage glanced towards his companion. “I’m sorry, Steiner. I haven’t stopped talking about these books all morning. Is everything alright?”

Steiner perked up. “No, it is I who must apologize, Master Vivi. Everything you’re telling me is wonderful news and very fascinating.”

“Something is wrong, though,” Vivi stopped walking. His long coat with embroideries of ivy’s waved in the gentle spring breeze.

Steiner was still for a moment before heaving a sigh. “My mind is on Beatrix, I’m sorry.”

“Is she okay?” Vivi tilted his head.

“Yes... I mean, well, for the most part,” Steiner pursed his lips, reaching for a velvety rose. “She’s simply a stubborn beast, Master Vivi. She refuses to stay down when she should.”

Vivi adjusted his hat and paced a few steps. “I’d say we’re all a little guilty of that.”

“I’ve finally convinced her to see a doctor,” Steiner said, looking over his shoulder. “We go in just an hour and I’m nervous, Master Vivi. What if she’s gravely ill?”

“I doubt it’s grave,” Vivi shook his head. “I saw her this morning.”

“And?”



“Well, she definitely looked pale,” Vivi told him. “A little on the warm side. Maybe it’s just the common cold.”

“I think it’s desert fever,” Steiner and his friend continued walking, stepping over a pile of confetti a maid was desperately trying to contain.

“I... don’t think that’s a thing, Steiner,” Vivi’s golden eyes fell across the sheepish captain.

“So, we can transport ourselves to a new planet, but you can’t inhale too much sand and get sick?” Steiner furrowed his brows.

“Well, you have a point...” Vivi said.

“I’m just worried, Master Vivi,” Steiner again found himself drawing his hands behind his back. “Beatrix will work herself to death if she had the choice.”

“It’s a good thing she has someone like you.”

“Thank you, Master Vivi. Truly.”

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That early afternoon, Garnet found herself in the personal study room for the monarchs of Alexandria.

Portraits of all the past leaders hung on the wall, completely surrounding her. As she did her best to focus on the literature sent to her by concerned citizens, she couldn't help but feel like all the past rulers were staring at her. Garnet pressed her hand to her forehead, tilting her head down to follow the loopy writing of a seamstress who was complaining of large import taxes on fabrics. Still, it felt like the eyes of the portraits were boring into her shoulders, her head, all over her. Garnet closed her eyes for a moment, hoping her headache would wane. Her first day as a seventeen year old was not quite how she envisioned it. But she took a deep breath, focusing again at the beginning of the complaint. Beside her, a tall stack of letters written to the Queen awaited her review so she could construct her quarterly response to the people. But Garnet felt so overwhelmed. She knew she couldn't take a break or rest her eyes; the people of Alexandria relied on her to read their complaints, their inquiries, and their wishes. Her head throbbed, however, at the task. She was very tired. Garnet hadn't slept well the night before. After she had retired from her party, she ended up laying bed and staring at the ceiling for hours. Mainly, she thought about Zidane. She recounted the many memories she had made with the tailed boy. How could it be that just one year

later, he would be gone without a trace. Garnet sighed, combing her hand along the fluffy quill laid beside her. The historic ink well that was said to have been made for the first King of Alexandria gleamed in the afternoon light. She thought to Blank's request, feeling her insides constrict. Her eyes hovered over the request in front of her for a moment more before she decided to push it aside. She simply couldn't be bothered to worry about the cost of textiles to Alexandria. Garnet heaved a sigh, reaching for the next parchment which made an inquiry about longer fishing docks in the west of Alexandria. Suddenly, however, the doors to her study flung open and Hilda appeared, wrapped in a comfortable powder pink gown.

"Good afternoon, darling!" Hilda called as Garnet hunched her shoulders from being startled. Garnet sighed, laying her quill across her spacious desk and looked over her shoulder at her aunt. Lady Hilda's sweet blond hair had been braided to resemble a fish tail. In her hand, a bubbly cup of water fizzled. 'I certainly hope you're not *too* hungover from your party. It looked as if you were having an absolute ball.' The Lady grinned, seating herself on a purple velvet love seat beneath the solemn portrait of the first Queen of Alexandria.

“No need to thank me, of course, darling. Just give me the juicy details.”

Garnet sagged her shoulders, her white button up crinkling. “There isn’t much to say... I’m in the middle of something, Aunt Hilda. Who let you in here? These are supposed to be my private quarters.”

Lady Hilda laughed, her shoulders bobbing up and down. “Oh, darling, I’m the Regent’s wife. They listen quite well to me around these parts. Come on over here, sweetheart. I’ve asked a maid to bring us some afternoon tea and carrot cake.”

“I really must keep working on these,” Garnet gestured towards the tall stack of parchment.

“Oh, the people will never stop complaining,” She waved her hand dismissively. “Worry about that another time. I am asking to speak to you, darling.”

Garnet tapped her nails against the edge of the desk. “If this is about Liam, there is nothing to discuss.”

“Garnet, sweetheart!” Lady Hilda jumped straight to her feet, her skirt ballooning with her energy. “You know that’s exactly what I wish to discuss. I watched you two all night! I saw you two emerge from the dark garden.”

“It isn’t what you think,” Garnet looked over her shoulder. Nervously, she smoothed her orange skirt, picking imaginary lint from it. “He’s a nice boy... knows a fascinating amount about airships.”

“Are you telling me, darling, that Liam didn’t get a goodnight smooch from you?” Lady Hilda furrowed her brow.

“Of course not,” Garnet looked equally as perplexed. She pressed her back stiffly to her chair. “I only just met him, Aunt Hilda. I couldn’t possibly consider kissing him.”

“Oh, and why not?” Hilda came to stand beside Garnet’s desk, pressing her manicured nails to the dark wood. ‘He’s a strapping young man and you’re an exquisite young lady!’ Hilda grinned. “Besides, I think you two would make cute babies.”

“Aunt Hilda!” Garnet’s cheeks heated up and she found herself moving across the private study, her arms crossed over her chest. “I wish you would simply drop it.”

“Darling...” Hilda sighed, her heels echoing across the room. She approached Garnet, wrapping her arms around her wiry shoulders and pulling her in close. “I don’t mean to cause you grief or hound

you... I'm only thinking of your best interest, you know that, right? What you're doing to yourself is so unfair. You're a Queen. You should be allowed to let your hair down sometimes. You should be free to feel however you want. You cannot punish yourself because of one boy."

Garnet pursed her lips together, keeping her pinched face turned away from Hilda. "It's unfair, Aunt Hilda... that he died and I lived. It all still feels too fresh. I'm... I'm not ready yet. Can't you respect that?"

"Darling, I'm sorry, I just worry if I don't give you a push, you're going to sink into this goo of emotions. You're my niece, you're a beautiful young girl... I only want what's best for you. I think you should see Liam again. Perhaps at your Uncle Cid's airship gala next month? Of course Liam will be there. He's built dozens of ships," Hilda smiled, giving Garnet a squeeze. "Think of it as your second date. And a polite woman *will* give a peck on the second date."

"That will only give the tabloids more yarn to spin," Garnet shook her head. "I barely know him. It would be inappropriate to have him escort me at the gala."

“You know,” Lady Hilda shot Garnet a deadpanned look. ‘For such a beautiful young woman who has just about any male under your dark and smoldering enchantment, you play far too nicely.’ She clucked her tongue. “Please, darling, won’t you consider him again?”

Garnet’s eyes fell above the fireplace mantle where the portrait of her mother hung. She chewed on her lip for a moment before she sighed. “I will consider it.”

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Zidane raked his soft dark hair from his face as he emerged from the salon. His boyishly layered and shaggy brown hair fell across his forehead, clawing over his bold brows. He couldn’t remember the last time he had cut his hair. It felt almost like he lost fifty pounds. The marketplace was even more busy as the early afternoon began to wane on. Zidane clipped the gold button of his cloak together and began down the stairs, tilting through the crowds of people. His heart was thundering in his chest as he watched the castle tower higher and higher over him. He almost felt like he was going to throw up. Maybe even faint. He approached a rather bored looking Knight of Pluto who flipped through a

hunting magazine beneath the tall stone archway of the gondola station.

“Excuse me,” Zidane said.

“Let me guess...” The knight muttered. “Lookin’ for the best inn? Maybe a pub?” The knight looked up and down at Zidane’s tired travel clothes.

“No, actually,” Zidane shook his head. “I was going to ask what I needed to do to enlist.” He withdrew the crumpled flyer from his pocket.

“Enlist?” The knight echoed. “You want to be a Knight of Pluto?”

“Ever since I was a kid,” Zidane lied, nodding his head.

“You don’t look much older than one.”

“Hey, the flyer doesn’t say squat about age,” Zidane countered. “Just tell me what I have to do.”

“Alright, alright,” The soldier stood straight now, closing the magazine. ‘I’ll take you across the river and to the barracks. The assistant to the Captain, Breireicht, will interview you. You’ll have to pass a physical, answer some questions, and then you’ll practically be a soldier.’ Together, the men stepped into the buckling gondola. Zidane’s cloak flared



around him as he gazed across the river at the Alexandrian Castle. His heart hammered loudly, nearly making his entire body shake. The soldier dug the long stick into the murky bottom of the river. “So... where’re you from?”

“Lindblum...” Zidane said quietly, his eyes never leaving the castle.

“Lindblum, huh? Well, you’ll fit in just fine, I think,” The soldier said, pushing with great effort to keep the gondola moving. “What’s your name?”

Zidane blinked his blue eyes slowly, tilting his head as the castle grew larger and larger in his vision. “Zeke,” He finally said. “Zeke Tisdoll.”

# Chapter Six

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## Chapter Six

The barracks for the Knights of Pluto was tucked into the far southern point of the castle garden, directly across from the private quarters for the captain and general. Zidane walked quickly alongside the gondola operator who showed him to a two story building that was painted beige and accented with dark brown trimming. There were two large wrap around balconies and numerous wall length windows covering the house. Zidane glanced nervously over his shoulder at each turn. He felt he could breath a little easier, however, when he was showed inside with the door firmly closing behind him. Immediately, he was greeted with a large living quarters that had a stone laid fireplace, numerous chairs, and shelves of books. Some swords laid forgotten in the corners of the room. Across from the social area was the dining room that sported a long table with matching benches lining the sides. The ground floor already smelled like beef strew. The first shift would be taking their lunch soon. Zidane was shown upstairs to a room at the end of the hall. It had a few desks, numerous cabinets, and papers

cluttering every surface. An older man, a bit heavyset, was busy sorting through some of the mess on his desk. His helmet laid discarded to the side and his head sported thinning brown hair. He paused and looked up when the door opened.

“Sir,” The knight quickly saluted. “I’ve brought to you a man who’d like to enlist.”

“Enlist?” Breireicht arched his eyebrows. “You found one of our posters, son?”

“Yes, sir,” Zidane nodded, removing it from his pocket again despite its horrid condition.

“Good, good,” Breireicht gestured towards the wooden chair in front of his desk. “You’re dismissed, Kohel. You can have yourself a seat, son.”

Zidane watched as the other soldier saw himself out. Zidane was hesitant for a moment, as if rethinking all his choices. There was no going back the moment he sat in that chair. But he found himself moving forward, dropping his backpack to the ground beside him. Breireicht began clearing away all the unorganized shuffle of papers, discarding them on someone else’s desk. He then

reached into a drawer, placing a clean sheet down that Zidane saw was an application.

“Well, you’ve come at a good time,” The soldier said, rifling about for an ink well and quill, which he handed to Zidane. “The Knights of Pluto has been understaffed and overwhelmed for quite some time. It’d be nice to have a few extra sets of hands around here. Especially in the castle.”

“That’s what I was hoping to hear,” Zidane said, struggling to keep his voice even. He attempted to drop the octave of his voice. He leaned forward, pressing his elbow to the desk, to review what he had to fill out. “You know, I’ve wanted to be a Knight of Pluto for quite some time.”

“Got any friends with the same mindset?” Breireicht leaned back in his chair, folding his hands across the belly of his armor. Zidane shook his head, however. ‘Damn shame. Ever since the war, people don’t want to put the armor on anymore. They want to go out and see the world, like they’ve been missing something all along.’ He waved his hand dismissively. “Oh well... what’s your name, son?”

“Zeke,” Zidane replied with his deepened voice.

“Zeke, eh?” He nodded. “Well, I’d like to say you got the job already, Zeke, but Captain Steiner trusts I go through all the motions so the recruitment process is fair. General Beatrix will also lose her head if she finds us slacking on any part of it. So, go ahead and fill out your personal information there. After that, we’ll get you fitted into some armor. It’s a lot heavier than it looks. You’ll have to perform a physical, as well, that way we know where you shine and where to put you.”

Zidane nodded, slowly dipping the quill into the murky ink. His hand nearly trembled as he brought the tip to the paper. He took in a deep breath, sealing all his lies and effectively erasing his identity with the swivel of his wrist. *Zeke Tisdoll. Seventeen years old. Born in Lindblum. Former technical hand for an art studio. No known illnesses.* Zidane was slow as he continued down the list, checking box after box, knowing that either Steiner or Beatrix would see the application. After he signed his fake name at the bottom, he handed it back to Breireicht. The moment the starchy parchment slipped from between his fingers, he knew Zidane Tribal was gone. The soldier reviewed it quickly.

“An art hand, huh?” He said, letting out a low whistle. “Hope you did more than sit and watch the

clouds go by on the canvas. Can you run a mile?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How fast?”

“I’ve never timed myself.”

“Well, let’s find out, then. Come on,” Breireicht gestured for Zidane to follow him down the hall, where he opened the door to a training room filled with javelins, swords, archer targets, bows, and arrows, along with hay stuffed dummies. Some of the dummies had been well practiced on. One of their heads dangled precariously from its shoulders. Breireicht opened a cabinet, revealing several sets of armor. They ranged in a variety of sizes. ‘Take your cloak off so I can figure out what size you need,’ He said with his back to Zidane. As Zidane fumbled with the button, he hurriedly stuffed his tail up the back of his shirt. He discarded the cloak to the floor. “You’re a lot thinner than I thought. That’s alright. We mostly eat beef around here. We’ll thicken you up.” Breireicht set the armor on a nearby chair and Zidane swiveled on the balls of his feet so the man wouldn’t see his tail hiding behind him. The soldier then opened a drawer, pulling out a pair of khakis and a white undershirt. “You’ll wear these underneath your uniform at all times. General

Beatrix likes for us all to cut the uniform as closely as possible. I'll give you a few minutes to change." And with that, he let himself out, leaving Zidane alone in the training room.

For the first time, Zidane released a breath he didn't know he was holding. He looked around the room, almost in a daze. The blood behind his eyes throbbed. He was really doing this. *Always have to do things the hard way...* He recalled Blank once saying. *It's always your way or the highway, huh?* Maybe this was the hard way. Zidane pulled his grimy and tired shirt off his shoulders, reaching for the fresh one that smelled of lilac. Zidane still reeled to get back in step with reality. He felt like so much had changed in the course of a year. Yet, *he* didn't feel any different. All of his friends at the party looked happy and healthy. They seemed to have readjusted just fine. But for Zidane, it felt as if everything had only happened just one week ago. He pursed his lips as he staggered into his khakis, reaching for the armor leg bracers next. He wanted to snap himself back into reality. He wanted to feel like one with time again. Zidane sighed as he lifted the chest plate, running his fingers over the crest of Alexandria. He thought of Garnet in that moment and his heart oozed.

A curt knock on the door drew him from his mind and he looked over his shoulder to Breireicht. “Ah, good, you’re almost done. Do you know how to clip your front and back plates?”

“Y... yeah,” Zidane nodded stiffly, quickly shrugging into it and fastening it, just as Blank had showed him a year ago.

“You alright, son?” Breireicht arched his bushy brows. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I’m fine,” Zidane told him, sweeping his helmet up into his hands. He turned towards the assistant captain. “Just tell me what I gotta do.”

---

Beatrix focused on writing notes for the doctor on parchment as she sat in a stiff stool in a rather bland room. The doctor was busy washing his hands in a basin just across the room. Steiner was anxiously rubbing his hands together behind his back, chewing on his lips. Beatrix paused from writing in her cursive loopy style and lifted her head to look at Steiner with arched eyebrows. She could see how jittery he was. Beatrix was certain it was nothing serious. A common cold, a seasonal flu— nothing



she couldn't handle. Doctor shook his hands from the water and reached for a linen.

“General Beatrix, good afternoon. It's not very often I see you around here, unless you're delivering me a soldier,” The doctor grinned politely. ‘Let me see what you've written here.’ He paced a few steps and each time, Steiner grew more and more wound up. Beatrix could almost sigh watching Steiner, but she kept herself focused on the professional who was nodding as he paced. “Mhm... well, General Beatrix, I'll need you to do something for me, please.” He went to a cabinet and rifled through the shelves. “Have you been drinking water today?”

“Yes, sir, of course,” Beatrix nodded.

“Good,” The doctor held a cup out towards her. “I'd like for you to urinate in this, please.”

“What!?” Steiner's eyes were as wide as saucers. “What kind of sick practice is this?!”

“Captain Steiner, please,” The doctor said coolly, holding his hands up. “I've been a doctor for over five decades. This is a very common practice I've come to be well-versed in. General Beatrix's notes have me suspecting that she is with child, that's all.

Urine can tell you many things about the state of someone's health."

Beatrix bolted up from her stool to grab Steiner's arm. He just about tilted over. His face blanched and yet his cheeks grew bright red. Beatrix put him in the stool instead and walked a few paces, crossing her arms over her chest. "Wi... with child!?" Steiner was nearly breathless. "That... that means..."

"Yes, if I conclude with this test that Beatrix is with child, that means you'll be having a baby come the winter," The doctor nodded.

"Are you sure it's not desert fever?" Beatrix asked as Steiner pressed a hand to his sticky forehead.

"Oh, General Beatrix, you know that's urban legend," The older man chuckled.

"Me...? Pregnant?" Beatrix furrowed her brow and shook her head.

"It's the first thing I'd like to test," The doctor crossed towards her, placing the cup in her hands. He continued to grip her slender wrists. "It's alright, General Beatrix. You've fought dragons head on. If you are... I don't think a little tyke is going to take you down."

Beatrix held the cup in her hand, her heart pounding thunderously in her chest. She was never quite one to have a maternal bone, it felt like. Though Garnet in her youth had been quiet and relenting, Beatrix had never had the urge or desire to hold a child or allow them to sit in her lap. She never catered directly towards them or went out of her way to give them anything. She may have been a fierce swordsman and a top tactics general, but she didn't feel like she had the cahoots to wrangle with a child. *Especially* if it was anything like her. Beatrix lifted her dark eyes to spy Steiner, who seemed to be deep in the delves of his mind. Of course, the child could always be like Steiner. Maybe she wouldn't mind that. But she considered the burden of carrying a child. Beatrix's greatest fear was becoming invalid. Beatrix finally nodded, letting out a pensive breath.

“Okay, let me go to the washroom.”

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The sun room in the high front tower of the castle was flooded with the bright afternoon sun. The dark wood furniture gleamed from its fresh polish. A large coffee table with elaborate carvings along the legs was cluttered with many treats. A porcelain

white tea pot with matching cups and saucers were gathered at the center. There were glazed ladyfingers and sticky buns stacked in a marvelous mountain. Fresh macaroons that sported dainty pastel colors were set neatly on a large white dish. Alongside it were sugar powdered dough balls and chocolate wafers. However, the brocade couches that surrounded the snack time fit for a party were only occupied by Eiko and Vivi. The black mage sat patiently with his clasped in front of him. He looked to the paintings on the walls that depicted scenes of gallant wars from past eras. Eiko, however, looked royally annoyed. She had her arms crossed over her chest, her lower lip stuck out. She had taken the time to sweep her hair into two large buns on her head, which was not an easy feat. She was angry no one was there to see it.

“She’s *always* late for tea time!” Eiko shook her head out of frustration.

“Who?”

“Mother!” Eiko said immediately. “And Dagger.”

“Dagger is really busy,” Vivi told her. “I saw the work in her study this morning. It’s a lot.”

“That is no excuse,” Eiko replied. “Being a princess is all about punctuality. She knew it started promptly at two!”

“But it’s only three minutes after.”

“It’s *rude*, Vivi!”

The door to the sun room opened and Eiko nearly broke her back to look over the couch. She was disappointed to see it was only Freya, however, who had a book and a sandwich in hand. The dragoon paused after entering, tilting her hat up. “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t know this room was being used. I’m just having lunch.”

“Freya, join us for tea!” Vivi waved his arm. “We have lots of food we won’t eat.”

Freya set her book on a nearby table, crossing to the back of the couch. “Wow, all of that just for you two?”

“Mother and Dagger are very late,” Eiko huffed.

“Oh, Dagger is coming?” Freya rounded the couch to ease herself onto a love seat. She took a bite of her sandwich, looking to the pleasant mage and the annoyed young Lady. “I’m leaving tomorrow morning, back for Burmecia for

reconstruction. I thought I'd have to make another trip back to speak with all of you, but I wanted to make a proposal."

"What kind of proposal?" Vivi adjusted his hat.

"Well," Freya lowered her sandwich into her lap. 'With Dagger's permission, of course, what would everyone think of designating an area of the Alexandrian garden as a memorial for Zidane?' Eiko's frustration immediately drained from her face upon hearing his name. Even Vivi lowered his head for a moment. "I only believe it is right," Freya continued. "I knew Zidane for a very long time, when we were both just struggling kids trying to understand this world. And what he's done for all of us... we should honor him, especially now that..."

"What?" Eiko asked with a somewhat droopy voice.

"... now that it seems unlikely he survived."

"I think that's a wonderful idea." Everyone in the room cocked their heads towards the door to find Garnet and Hilda standing there. Garnet was smiling politely, though it was easy for her friends to spy her exhaustion. Garnet closed the door, coming to sit beside Freya. Hilda ignored the eyes she got from

her daughter as she found her place next to Vivi. She immediately set to pouring everyone a piping hot cup of tea. “What kind of memorial were you imagining?”

“Nothing too elaborate,” Freya replied. “Some nice new flowers, perhaps even cat tails as a gentle nudge. A bold plaque in his honor.”

“So... a grave without a body?” Eiko cocked an eyebrow up.

“Eiko!” Hilda admonished.

“In simple terms... yes, I suppose,” Freya nodded. “I think anything is worth the thought that people may learn about him or pay their respects.”

“I like that idea, Freya,” Garnet told her. “I think I’ll ask Tantalus if there’s anything they’d like to make an addition as. Perhaps some of his old belongings? He mentioned he had an airship model collection... I wonder if that’s still around. I truly think it will be good to have anything there for him. It will make it seem like he’s not as far away...”

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Zidane made the last sharp turn in the garden, pumping his arms back and forth. His helmet

clattered against his skull as the bobbing sight of the barracks grew in his vision. His boots thundered to a stop against the cobblestone and he took in a sharp raspy breath, pressing his hands to his hips. He turned towards Breireicht who was clutching a clock in hand, his eyes wide. Zidane tilted his helmet up slightly, exposing his sticky brown bangs across his forehead.

“What...?” Zidane panted.

“You just ran the entire garden in less than seven minutes. The... the record was *twelve*,” The assistant captain seemed bewildered.

Zidane shrugged, stretching his arms across his chest. “Would have been faster if I didn’t get lost in the eastern part...”

Breireicht grabbed his discarded clipboard from a bench, hurriedly scribbling the time with a flapping quill. “You can do fifty-three push ups *in a row*; you can do, for god’s sake, eighty-nine pull ups...” The soldier shook his head. ‘Your sprint time is exceptional, you can bench well above your weight... Are you *sure* you only mixed paint for a living?’ Zidane nodded. “Captain Steiner is going to be over the moon with these stats, Zeke! You’re probably the fittest soldier this teams ever seen. The



Captain will want to meet you immediately after he's done with his current engagement!" Breireicht laughed as Zidane paused, thinking about that scenario. "General Beatrix might even want to shake your hand once I turn this paperwork in. Welcome aboard, Zeke. Laudo is inside finishing up his lunch. I want you to go with him for his second shift. He's stationed inside the castle. You should get the grand tour. When there are emergencies, it's valuable to know all the hallways and secret tunnels."

Together the two returned inside. It was the only space Zidane's helmet was allowed to come off. His hair was molded and sticky to his skin as he hooked the helmet up on the wall by the door. The first floor was rowdy with noise now as he peered through the wide archway to spy the table cluttered with breads, cheeses, and big pots of stew. The soldiers talked and laughed ferociously as they took their break. Breireicht beckoned for Zidane to follow and the two emerged in the dining room. Immediately, it quieted as the soldiers looked at the total stranger.

"Hey, guys, listen up. This is our new recruit, Zeke. He just ran the entire garden in *seven minutes*," Whistles, hoots, and laughter rang out. "That's right, Weimar. He beat you! Can't tell the

ladies anymore you're the fastest soldier on the team."

"He just can't talk to the same ladies!" The soldier hollered back and his teammates drummed against the table like a school's lunchroom. Zidane was somewhat charmed by the loose atmosphere they created.

"Be good to him. He's got good promise on this team, I can feel it. Laudo, he'll go with you for your second shift."

"Yes, sir," A wiry man said as he stuffed cheese into his mouth.

"Well," Breireicht pat Zidane on the shoulders. "Captain Steiner should be back in his barracks by now. I'll deliver this paperwork and make you really official. Then I can give you a sword. I'll see you this evening, soldier." Zidane nodded stiffly and turned to watch him slip out the door. Anxiety blossomed in the pit of Zidane's stomach. What if Steiner knew just looking at the papers? What if he had done all this just to fail and have his cover blown? *Then* how would he explain himself to his friends?

“Hey, man!” A soldier called. “Cop a seat, have some lunch.”

“Oh, yeah, thanks,” Zidane nodded, stepping over the bench. He was very hungry he realized in that moment and helped himself to bread and cheese.

“Zeke, was it?”

“Mhm,” Zidane said behind his mouthful.

“My name’s Haagen. I’ve served for the Knights of Pluto for thirteen years now.”

“And I’m Mullenkedheim,” A soldier across the table with short blond hair said. “You already know Weimar. He’s the biggest liar this teams ever seen.”

“If it gets the ladies...” Weimar shrugged passively, eating a heaping spoonful of beef stew.

“So, what made you want to enlist?” Laudo asked, helping himself to more cheese.

“Eh,” Zidane tilted his head. “Needed some new direction in life. Lindblum was too big.”

“My dad sent me here all those years ago,” Haagen laughed. “Can’t believe he was right about it fitting me.”

“We like to have some fun, too, between all the work,” Mullenkedheim told him. “Sometimes we get lucky enough to take some of Squad Beatrix out for bar games and drinks.”

“I think the best part is seeing Queen Garnet,” Weimar wiggled his bold brows.

“It’s not an every day thing,” Mullenkedheim shook his head.

“What I would have given to be one of those suitors at the party last night...” Weimar sighed.

“Damn, Laudo, you’re eatin’ all the cheese. You were the first one here, leave some for us!” Haagen swatted at the thin man. “Get back on your shift, why don’t you?”

“Alright, alright,” Laudo stuffed one more slice in his mouth, staggering to his feet. He lifted his sword from the hook, slinging it across his chest. “You ready, Zeke?”

“Yeah,” Zidane stuffed the rest of his bread in his mouth. Once he grabbed his helmet, he knew once again, he was only Zeke Tisdoll.

Steiner and Beatrix found themselves at their narrow kitchen table, shoulders hunched, holding tea but not really consuming it. Beatrix had only made it to distract herself. Steiner watched the mint leaves swirl about his cup, reminding him of all the signs they had ignored. The ticking clock was growing louder and louder by each passing moment. The Captain and the General made eye contact and still only stared. The doctor felt confident in his ruling. Beatrix was indeed expecting. She couldn't have been far along, she suspected. The doctor had measured her hips, waist, and bust. She was no bigger than she was from her last reported physical. Of course Beatrix would assume it happened just before her last search and rescue effort six weeks before. Steiner was too embarrassed in his own mind to retrace what could have caused this. Beatrix sighed, lowering her tea cup to the table.

“Okay, first impression was shock,” Beatrix said. “What’s your second impression?”

Steiner shook his head, pressing a hand to his forehead. “Beatrix, people are going to know we have sex.”

“I... think they already assume that,” Beatrix furrowed her brow. “We live together.”

“What? Oh god’s no...”

“Steiner, what’s your second impression on the baby?” Beatrix asked again.

“Well,” Steiner took in a deep breath, straightening in his seat. “I am not opposed to the idea of having one, I suppose. I’ve never quite envisioned myself as a father, but... I think I might be able to do it.”

Beatrix sighed. “It’s not you I’m worried about... it’s me. Steiner, I never could see myself having kids. My mother and I never ever bonded, either. What if I have this child and it just... doesn’t come naturally? What if I can’t make it stop crying or... what about breastfeeding? I’ve heard stories of babies have aversions to their own mother’s. What if that happens to me? What if I fail to raise this child properly?”

“You’re worrying about things in the wrong order,” Steiner shook his head. “You and I are both going in blind on this, but maybe we can do it. Maybe it’s not as hard as it looks.”

“Raising a child *is* hard!” Beatrix said. “I’m out of my element, Steiner. I’m in way over my head.”

“Beatrix,” Steiner reached across the table, grabbing her wrist. “I know it’s all a little overwhelming right now. I think it’s finally setting in on you like it did to me in the office. But there is time for things to change. There are months to get prepared. I’m sure the whole idea will be less scary the further we go.”

“Okay, you’re right,” Beatrix said, pursing her lips as if to seal her anxiety. ‘Nothing good happens when you panic.’ Beatrix looked briefly out the window. It seemed a storm was on the horizon, coming over the mountains. The clustered and darkened clouds only reminded her of the current state of her mind. “We shouldn’t tell anyone for now.”

“Not even Her Majesty?” Steiner arched his eyebrows. “What if you’re ill again? What will I tell her?”

“No one, Steiner.”

He was beginning to open his mouth to object when there came a curt knock at the door. Steiner glanced to the clock. It was a half past two. It was most likely his assistant captain, Breireicht, coming to give his curtly update on the happenings of the Knights of Pluto. Steiner never found the updates

too interesting, but he admired the soldiers consistency in bureaucracy. Steiner pursed his lips. He came to his feet and opened the door to indeed fight Breireicht already saluting crisply. He had a large smile on, however, as he let himself into the private barrack.

“Good afternoon, General,” Breireicht greeted. “I apologize if I interrupted anything.”

“No, no,” Beatrix waved her hand dismissively. “We were just taking a break.”

“Captain, we have a new recruit!”

“A new recruit?” Beatrix and Steiner echoed in unison. Beatrix came to her feet to peer over Steiner’s shoulder as he was presented the paperwork.

“But... these numbers,” Steiner furrowed his brow. “This better not be a prank by you and those rowdy boys on the first shift! These numbers are nearly superhuman!”

“He’s amazing, Captain,” Breireicht told him. “He’s fast, agile, light on his feet. He’s just some young kid from Lindblum with an artistic background. But he’s built like an athlete.”



“A garden sprint in seven minutes?” Beatrix shook her head. “Soldier, that is practically impossible!”

“He did it, I saw it with my own eyes, General.”

Beatrix took the papers into her hands now, shaking her head. Never had she seen such a high performing soldier. “Why would somebody of this power join the Knights of Pluto?” Beatrix wondered aloud. She then paused and looked to the men. “No offense, but this boy should be a Royal Regency Soldier for Lindblum or something.”

“With endurance like this, though,” Steiner took the papers back in his hand to be sure his eyes did not deceive him. “We’d have a dependable shift member for garden patrol *and* the castle. He could probably do stairs twice as fast as any of us.”

“I’d like to meet this new recruit,” Beatrix said. “And if this is a prank, Breireicht, I don’t care that I’m not your direct superior. I will exercise the same courtesy of punishment as I do my own Squad.”

The Assistant Captain almost gulped audibly at the idea. “I assure you, General, he’s the real deal.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Beatrix said, returning to the table to ward off the nausea overtaking her.

# Chapter Seven

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## Chapter Seven

“Well, I guess it looks like Breireicht thinks I’d be the best tour guide for you,” Laudo grinned from beneath his helmet as he and Zidane entered the tall entrance of the castle. Nothing had changed at all. It was nearly like *deja vu* for Zidane, sucker punching him right in the stomach. He hadn’t quite accounted for the shock of being in the castle again. For a moment, he was worried the bread and cheese were going to come back up on him. ‘You know, before I became a Knight of Pluto, I wanted to be an artist. I wanted to write poetry and perform in heartfelt theatrical debuts.’ They both stopped in the middle of the room. Zidane gazed up towards the tall stone arches that followed the vaulted ceilings. He looked over the portrait of Queen Brahne and from head to toe at the statues of knights. “Obviously, that didn’t happen, but it’s always nice when the rare moment to strut my stuff pops up. Hey, you know— I perform local poetry at a coffee house on Thursday nights, you should come sometime. Maybe there’s something you’d like to share?”

Zidane paused and blinked, looking towards Laudo. “I don’t really do poetry, sorry.”

“Well, if you ever change your mind,” Laudo shrugged. “So, obviously, this is the grand foyer. If there’s ever an emergency, Knights of Pluto meet here. Squad Beatrix assembles in the garden. Tucked in the corners, those stairs leading down, are the libraries and studies. The Castle has a substantial library if you like to read. But it’s not very often we patrol through there. Unless the scholar’s see a rat. To the left and right are the commoner dining halls. Should dinner parties or benefit events happen, the main stage is the first floor right here.”

“Got it,” Zidane nodded.

Laudo began up the stairs. “We call this floor one and a half. There are some social rooms for more upscale matters, like meetings with other leaders... the important people, if you will. There’s a storage room this direction,” The soldier pointed as they continued around the square platform. ‘The reason we only call this a half floor, because besides the meeting wings, this floor leads to the balcony that overlooks the garden and airship dock. You missed a hell of a play yesterday. Tantalus came back for an encore presentation of *I Want To Be Your Canary*

and this time, things didn't wildly go wrong! I was on the edge of my seat the whole time.' Laudo sighed, clasping his hands together. "Ruby is such a force on the stage. I love her acting." Zidane pursed his lips from beneath his helmet. "Up the stairs here, to the true second floor, is where most the important stuff is." Together, they climbed the winding stairs and each step brought back a pulsating memory of when Zidane first lay eyes on Garnet. Laudo didn't notice how stiff his companion had grown beneath his armor. "To the right is just an upper balcony. Squad Beatrix typically stations there. The doors to the left here are strictly private. Only guards, distinguished guests, and the Queen may go beyond these doors. It's where the royal chambers are, the tower balconies, private studies and baths—the works."

"So, what's my route?" Zidane asked as they pushed through the doors. A familiar setting once again. An open air space, so large it would make anyone feel small. Zidane remembered briefly his panic racing through here, trying to find Garnet and Eiko. Within him, he could feel the rumbles of destruction vibrating through his bones. "Will I be in the castle, too?"

“I don’t know,” Laudo shook his head, pausing before the bridge that lead towards the private hall of the royals. “You don’t even have a sword yet. Captain Steiner will assign you as necessary. It’d be great, though, if you could take over these back chambers. So many winding hallways... I get tired just thinking of it.”

Just then, behind Laudo, the doors across the bridge opened. Zidane stiffened, making sure to mash his helmet low as the group of people appeared from the doors. It felt like, however, he was suffering another sucker punch all over. It was Garnet and Freya, who were having a very passionate conversation, it seemed. Zidane shivered beneath his armor as Garnet’s long red boots echoed against the freshly polished marble. He slender body swung with all its grace as she looked to the tall Dragoon. The past year seemed to have been good to Garnet. Zidane’s entire body ached as they emerged, coming across the bridge.

“Good afternoon, Laudo,” Garnet grinned. She stopped and turned towards the soldier, who melodramatically swung himself into a somewhat clumsy salute. “If you’re heading towards the back hallways, could you let a maid know that tea time

has finished? I'm sure Quina will be pleased to hear there are leftover sticky buns."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Laudo nodded.

Garnet cocked her head to look at Zidane and he felt himself rivet in his uniform. Those dark brown eyes, the color of the coffee he'd drink at Morrid's, were directly on him. He tilted his head down to cast a shadow across himself. "Two of you on patrol this afternoon? What's the occasion? Is everything alright?"

"Oh, this is the newest recruit to the Knights of Pluto, Your Majesty," Laudo came to stand beside Zidane, slugging him in the arm. Zidane immediately saluted. "This is Zeke and from what Breireicht has told us, he's one of the greatest soldiers we could ever have."

"A pleasure to meet you," Garnet held her hand out. "I'm Queen Garnet til Alexandros. Welcome to our kingdom."

A shiver came over the young man. Just like that, he realized, everything was gone. He was nothing but a stranger to this woman, when months ago they had held each other in their arms, staggering out of danger that came from every direction. All the late

night chats, the frightful feelings, the thoughts of hopelessness, and the desire for something better were long gone. The time they had spent confiding in each other, working together, becoming something cohesive was no more. It felt as if she wasn't even looking at him. After a moment, however, he kicked himself into gear and reached out, gingerly gripping her soft hand.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Zidane said in his forced voice. “A pleasure to be here.”

Garnet smiled politely and withdrew her hand. Zidane wished he could have held onto it for a moment more. Inside, his internal conflictions ravaged against the frame of his body, like a restless sea in a storm. He was kicking himself over and over again, proclaiming himself to be a fool. Why did he think that this was a good idea? Why didn't he just stay away? He never realized it would be this hard to stay invisible, but he held firmly to thought that perhaps everyone was truly better off without him. The way Garnet smiled— it reached her eyes. That's all he had ever wanted. Just for her to be happy. And though he couldn't be certain, at the moment he felt entirely unequipped to be Zidane Tribal. They didn't need him as much he needed them, he told himself. No one deserved to have a

dark cloud, an Angel of Death, following on their heels like a lost puppy, constantly reminding them of everything they had to overcome just to find a semblance to life. He sensed a harmony in her melodious voice. He couldn't dare allow himself to undo all their work. It'd be like ripping the stitches out of a recovering wound.

"I'd love to stay and chat, but I have matters to attend to," Garnet said. She had taken on that royal tone again. "The garden will be having renovations done to it soon."

"New flowers?" Laudo seemed excited by the idea. "I've heard Lily's of the Valley are very fragrant, Your Majesty."

"I hope the florist has as good of an eye as you, Laudo," Garnet grinned. "Me and Freya are hoping to create a memorial for a dearly departed friend of ours."

"I'm sure it will be beautiful, Your Majesty," Laudo told her. "Well, I better keep showing Zeke the ropes of being a knight. It was a pleasure seeing you, Your Majesty."

"Same to you," Garnet bowed her head. "It was nice to meet you, Zeke. Should you have any



concerns, please don't hesitate to let anyone know."

"Th... thank you, Your Majesty," Zidane replied, somewhat breathlessly. After a moment, Freya and Garnet continued on and Zidane released a sigh, tilting his helmet back up.

Laudo laughed, elbowing Zidane in the side of his chest plate. "Wow, first day on the job and you got to meet the Queen. Weimar is going to be pissed. You must be smitten by her!" Zidane looked after where she had disappeared to, almost begging her to come back in his mind. But what was the use? He wasn't Zidane anymore. His heart drooped at the idea. 'Ah, you know I'm only kidding, right? I think every man in the kingdom has a crush on Queen Garnet. She is exquisitely beautiful. She'll make a man very happy one day if she ever allows a suitor to come in through the door. In the year she's been queen, she hasn't even entertained the idea of finding a companion. Rumor around the castle is that her 'dearly departed friend' was actually her lover.' Laudo gestured for Zidane to follow him and they began making their way back into the private corridor that was drenched in old heirlooms, vases, and crystal chandeliers. "I'm not one to gossip, but the tabloids certainly don't hold back. I will be

interested to see what the journalists squeezed out of the birthday gala.”

Zidane was quiet, however, his mind drifting away from him, towards another time line that simply didn’t exist.

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“Laudo and Zeke aren’t back from the second shift yet,” Breireicht told Steiner as the Captain let himself into the barracks. The last wave of lunch was being served and the Knights of Pluto saluted to Steiner as he emerged into the dining hall. ‘I told him to give Zeke the full tour. You know Laudo... he really likes to give his best showmanship.’ Breireicht seated himself and fixed a bowl of beef stew, swiping a slice of sourdough from Dojebon’s reach. “They should be back any moment. Laudo is due to swap with Kohel at the gondola.”

“You’re certain he has good intentions?” Steiner furrowed his brow. “A man of that magnitude may have alternate ideas about his work of being a knight. Did you do your due diligence, Breireicht?”

“Of course I did, cap’n,” Breireicht nodded, brushing the bread crumbs from his lips. “He’s just some kid, anyway. Sounds like he didn’t want to

mix paint anymore. Can't blame a guy for that. Imagine a whole life of just watching the paint dry on the wall..." He shook his head. "I assure you Captain I did everything I needed to. I know you and General Beatrix like consistency. You would have been excited, too, if you had seen his performance in the physical."

Steiner sighed, crossing his arms over his chest. "How convenient I had a pressing engagement during that time..." A wave of blood washed through his skull as he remembered his current predicament. The stress of the Knights of Pluto and taking on a new guard were very minuscule in comparison to the thought of him and Beatrix expecting a baby come winter. He still tried to work out in his mind how they could even fathom rearing a child with their commitments and schedules. He knew Beatrix was deeper in thought, too, and rearing the physical exertions that come with carrying a child. His stomach twisted for a moment. He lowered himself down into an armchair that sat in the corner of the front foyer, just beside the stairs. Steiner stared at nothing in particular as he waxed and waned between the excitement of new life and the burden of change.

“Is everything alright, Captain?” Breireicht asked, lifting his eyes from his steaming stew.

“Hm?” Steiner arched his eyebrows. “Oh, yes. Fine, fine. I was just thinking about this new recruit, that’s all.”

“He’s on the team, right?” Blutzen asked behind a mouthful. “We could really use the help with patrol, Captain. Squad Beatrix always finds faults in our footsteps.”

“With numbers like his, yes,” Steiner nodded. “He has one final test, however: an interview with me.”

“Poor bastard...” Haagen muttered beneath his breath, shaking his head.

Steiner glanced to the clock on the wall, pursing his lips. “Blast it, Laudo. It’s five after! He’s going to be late to his third shift. Why did you send the new recruit with the chatterbox?!”

“Sorry, Captain,” Breireicht shrugged. “I didn’t really consider that.”

Steiner took a deep breath, stiffly adjusting himself in the chair. Again, he only stared at the door, willing the art-sick soldier and the new recruit

to appear. He told himself to be patient, but it wasn't quite working. Idle again, his mind wandered towards the prospect of having a child. Would they have a boy or a girl? Who would it take after? He certainly hoped the baby had Beatrix's nose. And her spitfire attitude. Would their hair be darker like his or more of a shimmering chestnut like Beatrix's? Who in the world could this baby possibly be? Two more minutes passed before Steiner growled in frustration and stood.

"I'm going to find them right now! Kohel needs to be relieved for lunch and the new recruit has final business to take care of before he can sleep here," Steiner stepped towards the door. "If you see Laudo, tell him the Captain would like to have a word with him in regards to punctuality. This isn't his laid-back coffee house. We have rules here!" And with that, Steiner flung the door open, heading into the garden. The knights left at the table snickered behind their lunch at the prospect of Laudo getting chewed out.

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Laudo and Zidane emerged from the castle into the sweet smelling garden. The sky was dark with heavy hanging clouds. It seemed they were in for a storm that night. Laudo took a breath of fresh air,

pressing his hands to his hips. “Well, I think that’s pretty much everything to show you in the castle. You should be set if, say, a dragon attacks us tonight. That is... if you get your sword,” The wannabe poet grinned and looked towards the gathering clouds. “You know it’s spring when it rains every evening in Alexandria. But you know what they say! Spring showers bring summer flowers!”

“Soldier Laudo!” He saluted on command at the soprano voice that was quite demanding. Zidane found himself also saluting as, with a pounding heart, he watched General Beatrix approach them. She seemed rather pale, perhaps just simply tired. But she kept her shoulders straight. ‘Captain Steiner has been looking all over for you. My second shift girls from the courtyard said you have yet to appear for your gondola shift. Have you no respect for your fellow soldier’s schedules? What kind of example are you setting for our new recruit?’ Beatrix gestured towards Zidane, looking at him from head to toe. Not a very tall boy, she noted, and he was rather thin. She found his numbers hard to believe in the moment. Zidane adjusted his helmet, tilting it down. “Go on, now, and fulfill your third shift. We will discuss this later.”

“Y... yes, General!” Laudo was quick to scamper away. Zidane watched him bolt around the hedges, down towards the waterfront. He was slow to turn towards Beatrix, still lamely saluting.

“At ease,” Beatrix told him and Zidane’s hands snapped to his side. She took the time to inspect him once again. He cut the uniform well and had nice posture. It was easy to see through his armor, however, that he was young. In a way, it reminded Beatrix of a youthful Steiner, coming to the castle to find a direction in life after the war all those years ago. ‘Zeke, was it?’ Zidane only nodded. “Breireicht showed me your papers. I must say, I was very impressed with how you performed. I had to meet you for myself. I’m General Beatrix. I lead the girl squadron of this castle. What brings you to Alexandria, soldier?”

Zidane was quiet for a few beats, his heart hammering in his chest. Beatrix had an eye for everything. She was the sharpest tool in the shed Alexandria had. He stood somewhat bowed before her, his helmet falling over his eyes. “My life was very monotonous in Lindblum. I was seeking a... change in pace.”

“Well,” Beatrix paced a few steps around him. Beneath his chest plate, his tail nearly thudded against the silver. “The life of a soldier is very much different from the world within an art studio. Have you ever held a sword before?”

“Yes, General.”

“Can you fight with one?”

“I’ve never had to,” Zidane shook his head.

Beatrix walked a full circle around him, her long white coat trailing behind her. She crossed her arms over her chest. “You can run fast and you’re physically capable. But a soldier is useless without proper sword discipline. Tell me, soldier... do you intend on sticking around? Captain Steiner and I do not like to waste our time, nor should we waste yours.”

“I’ve got no where else to go, General.”

“Do you have family?”

“No.”

“Where are they?”

“Dead,” Zidane said very blandly. In his mind, he couldn’t help but imagine the death of his own



character.

“How long have you been on your own?” Beatrix asked, tilting her head. Zidane tucked his chin further down.

“For as long as I can remember.”

Beatrix was beginning to open her mouth when the rattling of armor could be heard. Zidane could only watch as Steiner came around the corner, nearly breathless. But when he spotted Beatrix, he leapt. “Is this the new recruit?” Steiner approached the two and Zidane had to hold his breath to prevent himself from throwing up all over their shoes. Too many familiar faces in such little time, Zidane felt nauseated by the thought. “Where is Laudo?”

“I sent him on to his next shift,” Beatrix told him. “This, however, is the infamous Zeke we’ve heard about all afternoon.”

“Yes, yes,” Steiner nodded, also eyeing Zidane head to toe. The young man did his best to stand straight, though he was feeling rather woozy as the two inspected him. “You are the man who can run a mile in less than seven minutes. I must say, Zeke, your application was quite impressive. We’ve been in need of new recruits. We’re quite lucky we’ve

found someone like you. I'd like to speak to you further, however. I'm sure you have a moment for the Captain."

"Yes, sir, of course," Zidane's voice nearly cracked.

"Great, let's go this way," Steiner gestured towards the eastern wing of the garden. Steiner glanced back to Beatrix. She decided to set off to check on the other guards despite a pounding headache setting on. Zidane kept his eyes trained forward as Steiner bobbed at his side. He distracted himself with the blooming roses. He told himself over and over again in his mind that it was crucial to play it cool. He needed to think before he spoke. All the charm, the desire to make people laugh, it had to be switched off. Zidane took in a deep breath as he focused on who he wanted Zeke Tisdoll to be known as. A straight-laced man, he thought. Someone who did their job and nothing more. He had to be the model soldier so as not to draw attention to himself. They entered a circular plaza with a tall stone placed at the center. A fresh wreath of flowers sat amongst the neatly trimmed grass. For a brief moment, Zidane recalled finding Garnet here, rising above the ashes of her sorrows like the beautiful phoenix she

was. “What do you know about being a soldier, Zeke?”

Zidane blinked beneath his helmet, being sure to adjust it. “It’s all dedication, Captain.”

“Yes,” Steiner looked to Queen Brahne’s epitaph, floating through a different time in life momentarily. “But what kind of dedication?”

Zidane thought carefully. “Whatever form of dedication is needed in the given moment,” Zidane said, turning away from Steiner to peer down the long walkway where Garnet had cut her hair. He felt much more at ease with his back to the Captain. ‘Dedication, to me, means you should protect what’s important and never give up on yourself or anybody else.’ Gently, the water lapped up against the sloping stone and Zidane found himself drifting with the wake. “Every day I wake up and wonder who I want to be. Or who I should be. I think that’s the whole point of dedication; figuring out what part it plays in your life.”

Steiner watched the new recruit’s back for a moment. He pursed his lips and lowered his eyes. For a brief second, he recalled an old friend. “You sound very wise for someone your age,” Steiner said. “I imagine your time as an art assistant gave

you plenty of room for reflection. I'd like to think your parents are very proud of you."

Zidane slowly looked over his shoulder. "I don't have any parents."

"My apologies," Steiner bowed his head. "Is that why you've come here?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Zidane nodded. 'Before this, I was without direction in a lot of ways in my life. When the war started last year, I came to realize a lot of things about living. That every day is not promised and the people you love are not forever. Everything is only fleeting. Might as well do something good if you can, y'know? I just want to keep doing something... something right.' Zidane shook his head. "I want to be redeemable."

He heard the racket of Steiner's armor and the Captain appeared beside him, gazing out towards the wing of the castle that grew before them. The water rippled, always on the move, just like their own minds, it seemed. "That was a very honest answer, Zeke," Steiner said, somewhat somberly. "I can't say any soldier has been as honest as you have been. Even I wasn't truly honest with myself when I decided to join the ranks. But you're right. We all come looking to brandish the sword and bear the

Alexandrian crest because we want to be important. Valid. We want to try and leave a mark, one way or another. Whether that be giving a man a permanent scar or helping protect this kingdom.”

“Well...” Zidane tilted his head. “I think that’s what I’m looking for, Captain.”

Steiner turned to face the tall main structure of the castle. His eyes followed the gold paned windows, the curves of the four structural towers. “How good are you at keeping a secret, soldier?”

“Sir?” Zidane barely lifted his eyes.

“I won’t lie, soldier, you seem very well put together. I like your attitude, you seem clearheaded, and if you really do have the endurance Breireicht claims you have, I think you’re destined for a little more than just garden strolls,” Steiner folded his hands behind his back. “I still would like you to spend the next week working every shift. Gondola duty, garden patrol, castle checks, the works. Should you perform well doing that and satisfy my requirements, I believe you’re exactly the person I didn’t know I was looking for.”

“What do you mean?” Zidane furrowed his brow, looking at the castle now.

“I have a desire to shift some of my duties,” Steiner said. “As Captain, I have more pressing matters at the moment that require very tender care. I couldn’t decide who I’d choose amongst my knights, but I believe you’re the perfect fit. See, Zeke, my duties as Captain extend personally to Her Majesty. As does General Beatrix’s. We report directly to her and offer other services, such as protection and somewhat of an advisory role. I would like to see you as Queen Garnet’s personal bodyguard and correspondent.”

Zidane thought he was going to tip over. He looked to Steiner but immediately turned his face away again. His heart was nearly thumping against his chest plate and he was somewhat winded for a moment. “Me?” Zidane said, keeping his voice even. “The new guy in town? The person you only asked *one* interview question?”

“Sometimes you have to go with your gut,” Steiner grinned, placing his hand to Zidane’s shoulder. The young man felt so warm in his armor. Just between three inches of metal, Steiner genuinely had no idea who he was speaking to. ‘That’s a very cardinal rule of being a soldier. My gut is telling me to trust you. Something about you makes me want to.’ Steiner paced a few steps away.

“However, you’re not to speak of this impending matter to anyone until I’m happy with your performance. Can you keep a secret, Zeke?”

Zidane shuffled his boots against the familiar cobblestone and pursed his lips. After a moment, he nodded to Steiner. “Yes, Captain.”

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The rain pelted against the tall wall length windows of Garnet’s personal study that night. The thunder was long and ongoing and the lightning cast shadows across Garnet’s desk. The young woman sat hunched forward, her palm to her forehead, as she pored through another letter from her people, again begging for lower tariffs on linens and textiles from Lindblum. She sighed and laid her quill down. They wrote just about every other day. Wearily, she looked to her stack of unread propositions and wondered just how many of them had to do with textiles. Garnet had focused on more pressing matters in her first few months as Queen. The southern region of Alexandria was dipping into poverty. Garnet had established a new market in the area and designated a music area nearby. This helped create jobs and bring more prosperity to the area. She had managed to work deals with the

farmlands between Lindblum and Alexandria. Generously low shipping rates, the people of Alexandria had even more access to fresh food. She had constructed an entire River Quarter in the east, providing places for new bakeries, tailors, shoe makers, and other artisans. Garnet wanted to think she had made great strides forward, but the more letters she received, the less she felt like she was doing. The weekly civil meeting was to happen soon. Those were hard for Garnet. She was forced to sit at a table and furiously write and speak directly to those with complaints or proposals for Garnet. Sometimes they were less than civil meetings.

A crash of thunder roused her from her thoughts and she sat back in her chair, gazing around the lonely room. Only dark paintings of ancestors peered down on her. The nearby clock chimed ever so faithfully. It was nights like this when Garnet's heart sank the most. She didn't know what it was about a thunderstorm that evoked thoughts of Zidane. Maybe it was because he had always been such a calming person to be around. Even the most windiest storms in a tent with him couldn't make her be scared. Now she sat in a comfy, sturdy castle and where was he? Garnet tilted her head back. She wished she knew. Another bolt of lightning went off



and Garnet turned her head to look towards a table, where a rolled up parchment lay. Freya had commissioned an artist to sketch out the plaque she had envisioned for Zidane. Garnet had told her friend she'd put it at the top of her list, but she had lost the motivation to open it upon returning to her study. She knew Freya was being so thoughtful and kind. But for Garnet, the idea really did twist her up inside. How could she bear to look at his name coated in bronze? It would only truly confirm for her that's he really gone. She wished she could make Blank understand her hesitation to go back out there. It put a strain on the Alexandrian Castle. Between the men and resources needed and after all the fruitless efforts, Garnet couldn't keep doing it. She couldn't make herself give into the hope again but she also never wanted to believe he was gone. Blank and Tantalus couldn't go by themselves, either. She would have to live with the guilt if something happened to one of them.

Garnet sighed as gazed across her desk. Just beyond her windows, the storm lit up in a magnificent show in the sky. There, leaned against the back of the desk, was the powdery pink invitation Lady Hilda had given her before they departed back for Lindblum that afternoon. Her aunt

must have spent a fortune on them. It was the invitation to the Airship Gala in a few weeks. Garnet very much so disliked attending balls and social events. Everything felt so forced. As Garnet picked the invitation up to read it, a small slip of paper fell out from the inside. Garnet furrowed her brow as she reached for it, recognizing Hilda's handwriting that was arguably just as loopy as she were.

*Just in case you wanted it, darling, here is Liam's mailing address. XoXo.*

The Queen nearly rolled her eyes as she discarded it, barely even looking to the numbers scrawled below. As the leader of this kingdom, many people looked to her. But often times, Garnet felt as if no one was actually listening. Even though her Aunt Hilda didn't live here, it felt like she was the biggest criminal of this offense. Garnet adored Lady Hilda, but often times when she had her mind set on something, it was hard to convince her otherwise. Liam was a nice boy, Garnet acknowledged that. But there simply was no true spark, she was certain. When he set his hand against her, it didn't tingle like Zidane's touch once did. She couldn't expect every boy she met to leap off a balcony for her twice, but Zidane had clearly set the bar too high. Damn you, Zidane, she wanted to say.

But she couldn't. Her father had always told her as a child that the heart wanted what it wanted. Well, hers wanted Zidane. Liam nor Lady Hilda or anybody else for that matter could ever reach the fathoms of her being like Zidane did. For once in her life, she felt like somebody understood her. Through all the laughs, the exhaustion, the tears, the yelling; she had only grown to love him more for everything little thing he did. She didn't want to have her heart on the line like this anymore, but she couldn't give up on him. Garnet couldn't even comprehend the idea of Zidane being dead.

Garnet tilted her head back in her chair, gazing towards the embossed invitation that glittered in the lightnings strikes. It was like she was looking at a fate sealed for her. But what did destiny have in mind?

# Chapter Eight

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## Chapter Eight

Every morning the Knights of Pluto roused at dawn for a morning run. For Zidane, it was somewhat cathartic to run and only focus on his breathing. The castle looked delicate in the soft, dewy morning light as he jogged ahead of the group. After that, they met with Captain Steiner for a debrief and wolfed down breakfast and then they were off for sword discipline. “Swing and swing, jab, swipe, parry, swing!” Steiner would conduct as the men stood in neat rows with their glinting iron. Steiner and Beatrix were impressed with the new recruit’s sword use for someone who said they had no experience. That morning, the clouds threatened to open up with another storm as Zidane came around the final corner, slowing to a jog. He took in a deep breath, swinging his arms across his chest as he came to the rest point in front of the barracks.

“Six minutes and forty-four seconds,” Steiner noted from where he stood. “You’ve managed to shave twenty-two seconds off in the past week, well done, Zeke.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Zidane said breathlessly.

Zidane found the gondola shifts to be the most boring. Foot traffic towards the castle wasn't particularly regular in the middle of the week. He spent those four hours watching the clouds go by, spying darting fish amongst the surfaces, and sometimes he was lucky if a frog came by to keep him entertained for a menial moment. Garden strolls were somewhat pleasant, but also just as boring. The castle checks were interesting at best in the sense of noticing new things in paintings. He was always on his toes to spot Garnet, however, he hadn't seen her since that first time nearly a week ago. By the end of the eighth day of his training, Zidane found himself in his private narrow bunk. He had a wash basin with a mirror, a small table, and a somewhat comfortable bed. He sighed as he kicked the door closed behind him, discarding his helmet across the table. He looked to himself in the mirror, raking his fingers through his unruly brown hair. Some days seemed simple, almost mindless. Other days, Zidane found himself hollowly staring into his reflection wondering who the hell was looking back at him. Zidane sighed again, dipping his head down. Eight days on the job and still Zidane couldn't decide if this was such a good idea after all. The exercise and

routine had positively affected him. His left shoulder no longer bothered him anymore and the stiffness that plagued his body was long gone. The mental anguish of leaping back into society and organized time, however, was as chilly and stabbing as a river. In many ways, Zidane felt like he was spiraling out of control and there was no one to signal mayday to.

There came a knock at his door and he stiffened, pressing his hands to the edge of the wash basin. In the mirror, he saw Haagen peak his head in.

“Cap’n’s here for you,” Haagen said.

“What does he want?” Zidane looked over his shoulder. It was after dark now. Zidane had been wide awake far before the sun had even risen.

“I dunno,” Haagen shrugged, pushing the door open now. ‘He’s downstairs waiting for you.’ Zidane reached for his helmet, exasperation evident in his body language. He was hoping maybe Steiner had changed his mind about the bodyguard idea. Zidane felt entirely unfit for the position. All he’d do is mess it up like he had everything else. Steiner was crazy for not considering one of his longer term soldiers. He felt Haagen was much better equipped. “Why do you always put your helmet on?” Haagen asked as they left his bunk. “Captain Steiner doesn’t

require you always have it on. It's the worst part of the uniform, anyway."

"My hair is oily," Zidane said as they began down the stairs.

"Whose isn't after a fourteen hour day?"

Zidane was quiet as Steiner came into view. He stood patiently in the front foyer, his hands folded behind his back. He grinned lightly when he spied his star soldier. Zidane seemed a little rigid, however. Steiner was sure he was tired from his day. The Captain himself was also exhausted and knew Beatrix had already retired to bed. He was anxious to return to her. "Zeke, I'm sorry to bother you," Steiner said as Zidane came to the bottom of the stairs. Haagen slinked out of the scene, joining the other watching soldiers in the common room. "I was hoping you and I could go for a walk perhaps?"

"Oh man, is Zeke gettin' fired?" Haagen whispered to Breireicht.

"A walk? With the captain? At twilight?" Blutzen raised his eyebrows. "Maybe he knows too much and Captain Steiner can't just let him leave."

"No way," Laudo shook his head. "If Captain Steiner kept Dojebon, there's no reason to get rid of

Zeke.”

“Hey!” The clumsy man crossed his arms over his chest.

“Maybe the Captain’s threatened by Zeke,” Mullenkedheim grinned almost sinisterly.

Together, the curious group of soldiers watched as Zidane and Steiner showed themselves out the door. Immediately, Kohel went to the window, peaking around the bland curtains. The moonlight above shed down on the men’s armor and Zidane found himself almost dragging his feet beside Steiner. The frogs croaked as they passed the river. Steiner glanced towards the vacant gondola, double checking the soldiers had secured the tether. Zidane tilted his head down feeling even more miserable than ever. Coming to the Knights of Pluto had been the change he needed, but in the end, it proved to be much more painful than he anticipated. Zidane’s nerves were pricked as he waited for Steiner to speak. He followed the Captain past Queen Brahne’s memorial, heading towards the stairs that lead to the waterway. Zidane glanced towards a portion of the garden that was roped off. The water lapped up against the stone not far from their boots. Steiner looked out towards the glittering landscape of the



growing Alexandria. He took in a deep breath of sweet honeysuckle. With the approaching summer, the garden would be drenched in fragrance and vibrancy.

“I’m sure you know why I’ve brought you out here,” Steiner finally said, turning to spy his soldier had lost himself in the sights of the tall, glowing castle.

Zidane pursed his lips in the shadow of his helmet. “You’ve finished your evaluation of me.”

“I’m very impressed, Zeke,” Steiner told him and Zidane shuddered in his armor. “You’re punctual and thorough. You’re tireless and remarkable. Being a soldier was truly your calling. I want you to be Queen Garnet’s personal bodyguard and correspondent. You shall report directly to me and General Beatrix and Queen Garnet as necessary. It’s a very worthy title for only an eight day recruit. I’m trusting you, Zeke, to not let me down. You seem like your head is screwed on right. There can be no jackassery in the presence of Her Majesty.”

Zidane lowered his head, watching the moonlight sparkle across the surface of the rippling water. “You’re sure you can trust me?”

Steiner also looked to the water. “I’ve never felt more right about a recruit in my life. However... Soldier, please remove your helmet. I’ve just realized I’ve never truly seen your face.”

“I... I, uh,” Zidane lifted his eyes, feeling his mouth go dry. “I’m... disfigured. There was an attack on Lindblum last year... I’m sure you’re aware of it. I... I look grotesque, Captain.”

“That is nonsense, Zeke,” Steiner shook his head. “Do you think General Beatrix allows her wounded eye to prevent her from being courageous and heroic?”

“No, Captain, I just...” Zidane stiffened. “I would prefer to keep my helmet on, sir.”

Steiner turned towards Zidane and reached for his elbow, forcing him to turn on his feet to face him. Zidane’s heart was thundering in his chest, he was cursing in his mind. Why did he think he could prevent this from happening? Why would Steiner let some faceless soldier accompany the Queen on her agenda? *Why me?* Briefly crossed Zidane’s mind. Zidane back pedaled from Steiner’s reach, his legs somewhat shaky. He let out a deep sigh, his shoulders rising and falling rapidly.

“The wound must bother you a lot,” Steiner said. “I promise you, young man, nobody here will mock you for your wounds. It is part of life. It tells a story. Her Majesty will extend the same grace, too.”

Zidane thought his heart would simply give out in his chest. This was it, he told himself. He was busted, barely a week in. He couldn’t just run. All he could think in his mind was what an idiot he was. Of course Steiner would find out. But... was Steiner willing to help him continue this facade? Finally, he nodded towards the Captain. “I just want to say, Captain, that I am really, really sorry.”

“What?” Steiner furrowed his brow, watching the soldier pensively. Cautiously, he lowered his hands to his hips.

“This wasn’t how I wanted it to happen,” Zidane reached for his helmet, giving it the slightest tug. He held his breath for a moment. “But, uh...” Zidane lifted the helmet completely off, lamely dangling it at his side. His brown hair fell across his sweaty forehead and he looked to Steiner, who had paled significantly. “It’s good to see you, Rusty.” The Captain seemed rather stiff. He barely moved for a moment, but soon, his bold brow began to twitch and his jaw came unhinged.

“Zi... Zidane?” Steiner managed to finally choke out. ‘This is impossible. I’m delusional, I swear. This is what I get for not sleeping.’ He pressed his hands to his face, rubbing deeply. He turned but then paused, looking back to him. Zidane’s eyes were solemn and stone hard. “Is it really you, Zidane? Let me ask you something that only Zidane would know,” Steiner pressed his hands to his hips. Zidane sighed, bending his neck backwards.

“I just called you ‘Rusty’, isn’t that enough proof?” Zidane carelessly dropped his helmet and shrugged his chest plate off, revealing his stiff tail.

“I can’t believe it,” Steiner shook his head as Zidane clipped his torso piece back together. ‘But... how? Zidane, where have you been?’ Steiner blinked rapidly. “And... why are you a Knight of Pluto?”

“Look,” Zidane sighed, raking his hand through his messy hair. ‘Steiner, I haven’t even been awake and functioning for more than twenty-two days. It’s like I time traveled or something. For the past year, I just... there’s nothing there,’ Zidane hunched his shoulders and bit down on his lip. “I barely know what day it is, what month it is. I even forget the freakin’ year! I’ve been lurking around a bit...

everyone seems so... different, Steiner. And maybe I just can't accept all of that quite yet, but... I just wanted to be close to you guys."

"You have no idea how much Her Majesty has mourned you, Zidane," Steiner said, looking at him almost hurt. "Why can't you let all of us help you? Her Majesty has spent the last nine months sending search teams for you."

Zidane huffed, sitting down on the stairs. "I appreciate the concern but... I don't know, Steiner. I have to come to grips with this on my own. You've all accomplished so much, I just..." Zidane was quiet for a moment, folding his hands together and dangling his head downward. "I wanted to be redeemable for all of you. I left you all behind and like always, I was made a fool of."

"What happened?" Steiner knelt down in front of Zidane. "Where have you been for the past year? We've gone to the corners of this planet looking for you."

"I was on a farm... in Dali," Zidane looked up.

"You mean... this whole time, you've been right around the mountain range?" Steiner was almost

breathless. “Beatrix went so far...” He shook his head. “How did you get there?”

“Well,” Zidane pursed his lips. “The Iifa Tree started to collapse on itself. Vines were coming at us like we were parasites... and, I guess they were right. But Kuja summoned a portal beneath me and the last thing I remember was falling out of a forest and then... nothin’. Not until the beginning of January. A widowed farmer took care of me. I didn’t stay long, though. I was at Dagger’s birthday gala.”

“This whole time, you’ve been right under our noses,” Steiner said, still quite bewildered. “No wonder I thought you’d be perfect to take over my duties for an extended time.”

“Steiner,” Zidane sat up straight, looking directly at the Captain. “Nobody can know I’m alive. I need time to re-assimilate and... figure who the hell I even am. Please, it’s a personal wish that you call me Zeke. We shouldn’t even let Beatrix know.”

“That’s out of the question,” Steiner shook his head. “She has to know. And she’s much more clever than I am... and a lot more forceful.”

Zidane sighed, digging his elbow into his knee. “Okay, fine. But that’s it for right now. I just want to

feel normal, Steiner. I need routine again. But... I couldn't be more grateful for what you're doing for me. Who knows... maybe spending some time with Dagger will make everything feel alright again."

"I'd be surprised if not," Steiner nodded, picking Zidane's helmet up from off the ground. "For the record: I don't agree with this stupid idea, Zidane. You shouldn't contend with your problems on your own, in the shadows. You should be letting us help you, like you did for us."

"It's different, Steiner..."

"I don't accept that answer."

"Yeah, well, you're not an Angel of Death, are you?" Zidane ground his teeth together. "You didn't find out you were from a different planet, created in a test tube, played with like it was nothing more than an interesting little experiment. I found all of that out, what feels like, three weeks ago, Steiner! I've left you all in the dust twice and found myself always at an inch of my life without all of you. And maybe, Steiner, that's because I can't defy genetic make-up. Maybe it's just in my DNA to always screw things up. I... I need time to process this, but I cannot lay around all day just thinking about it. It'll eat me alive. I didn't even want you to know,

Steiner, because I didn't want to burden you with this. But... I trust you."

Steiner's face softened and he looked to Zidane's polished helmet that glistened in the bright moonlight. He slowly ran his finger over the small embossed crest of Alexandria. "If it's what you wish," Steiner finally said, slowly nodding his head. "It will indeed be burdensome but..." Steiner looked to the wilted young man. "I owe you my life, Zidane. And now, I shall help you find yours again."

He extended the helmet out towards Zidane. The recruit stared at it for a moment before gingerly taking it into his hands. "Thanks, Captain."

Distantly, the cicadas chirped and the frogs bellowed from the bobbing lily pads washed up against the embankments. "Tomorrow is the weekly Civil Meeting of the townspeople with Her Majesty. That will be your first event as her personal bodyguard. These gatherings can get... rather festive. You're to report at the eastern conference room by seven sharp."

Zidane stood, mashing the helmet back over his molded hair. "So, tell me, why was my position created? Why are you passing your duties off?"



Together, they ascended the stairs, weaving back through the windy garden. They came to a stop on the porch of the soldiers barracks. Steiner grinned, tilting his head. “You have your secrets, soldier. I have mine.”

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The bright morning light fell rapidly across Garnet’s face and she cringed, turning away from it. “Good morrow, Your Majesty!” She heard the eccentric voice of one of her most diligent maids. ‘Rise and shine, Your Highness! It’s a new day with new things to do. I’ve delivered your agenda to the tea table. Coffee is ready, too, My Liege.’ Garnet sighed, lifting her head from the pillow. It was a gorgeous day outside. It seemed the stormy clouds had been chased away, yet the weight in her heart remained. As she slipped from bed, the maid was at her side in a moment, settling her silk robe over her shoulders. “Slippers right here, My Lady,” She said, gingerly patting Garnet’s arm. She followed closely on Garnet’s heels, pushed her chair in for her, and gracefully poured the coffee, adding a dash of cinnamon and sending a wink towards the young woman. As Garnet took the first reviving sip of

coffee, she looked over her agenda that was, as usual, dictated by Steiner.

*Good Morning Your Majesty. I regret to inform you I am not available this morning due to a prior occupation with the Knights of Pluto.*

Garnet wouldn't blame Steiner if he came right out and said he disliked the Civil Meetings.

*As of today, however, I have found someone to fulfill a role that will help fill in my absence during this time. He is a new recruit by the name of Zeke Tisdoll. He hails from Lindblum and is a promising soldier. During this time, he will act as your bodyguard and carry correspondence for you as necessary. We will meet as soon as time permits. Dutifully, Steiner.*

Garnet sighed, lowering the agenda. A personal bodyguard? What was Steiner thinking? Garnet felt more than capable of taking care of herself and had proved it time and time again. She had heard the complaints from Mullenkedheim and Blutzen that they desperately needed more people walking about the premise. The Knights of Pluto worked longer shifts than Squad Beatrix and sometimes accomplished less. Why was this promising new

recruit Steiner described assigned to follow her around as she did her mundane tasks?

“Everything alright, Your Majesty?” The maid sung out as if there wasn’t a care in the world. Meticulously, she smoothed Garnet’s bed sheets and wiped clean the mirror at her vanity. She took a moment to sort through Garnet’s cosmetics and perfumes, carefully lining them up against the decadently carved wood sidings.

“Yes, ma’am, everything is fine,” Garnet said evenly. “It seems I have a new assistant, however. Despite being Queen, Stella, I truly do have a hard time breaking the ice with new people.”

“Ah, you needn’t worry about that, My Lady,” Stella laughed, rounding up the dirty linens from the marble bathroom. “You’re an interesting young woman, even when you don’t talk.”

Garnet didn’t finish her coffee. She powdered her face and applied rouge to look attentive. The Civil Meetings required lots of energy. She hoped by making it look that way, she would have more of a chance of getting a word in during someone’s anger fueled rant. Stella hummed as she combed through Garnet’s long inky hair. She put on an olive green silk dress that had intricate embroideries along the

narrow bodice. The skirt didn't have much flair, making it very modest, yet regal. Lady Hilda had given it to her, of course. Stella wished Garnet the best of luck on her day, making sure the young ruler left with the agenda in hand. The maid then set about to deep cleaning the royal chambers.

Garnet sighed as she found herself walking down the hallway alone. Her heels were muted against the carpet and she lifted her skirt, descending the stairs to head for the conference room. It was days like these where she felt more locked away than ever. Despite all the turmoil and uncertainty she faced last year, she'd do it all again if she had the choice, just to experience that freedom one more time. If it meant she could hear Zidane's gentle voice, carrying on in the dead of night, just one more time, she would do it without looking back. Now, she felt she had nothing to look forward to. She was walking directly towards the hardest part of her life. How dearly she wanted to do away with everyone's troubles, but things took time. It made her feel like a failure of a Queen. And it felt as if there was nothing on her horizon for her to be excited about. The Airship Gala in Lindblum was approaching rapidly. Her heart wrenched just thinking about having to dangle on Liam's arm in a public event.

As she came around the final corner, she spied a soldier in armor, waiting patiently by the door. Garnet took in a deep breath, pursing her lips as she approached. Upon hearing her, he saluted, and Garnet smiled politely at him. “Good morning, Zeke. I understand you’re filling in for Steiner this morning.”

Zidane cleared his throat, lowering his arm back to his side. “Yes, Your Majesty. Whatever you need, I am at your command.”

“I’m sure Steiner described a bit about this event,” Garnet glanced up and down the hallway. “The civilians will indeed be here promptly at eight o’clock. It’s best if we funnel them into a line. It makes it much easier for me to take notes. I wish for no physical conduct, however. If it is time for them to go, I appreciate gentle arm linking with the civilian.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Zidane nodded. “I understand your wishes.”

“Thank you,” Garnet pushed the doors to the conference room open. It was a large and spacious room with a wall of windows. It had a magnificent view of the mountains leading towards Treno. The ceilings were vast and high with gold leaf delicately

stroked in the grooves. At the very front of the room, there was a large table with dozens of inkwells and neatly stacked parchment. Zidane looked all around him, turning in a circle. ‘Quite grand, isn’t it?’ Garnet said, her heels echoing across the room. “This conference chamber had been badly destroyed during the Siege last year. The designer brought it back to life in quite an elaborate way.”

“How full does this room get during these meetings?” Zidane looked over his shoulder at her. She looked stunning in the morning light bathing over her. Her porcelain skin glowed and her dark hair was bold and alluring as it fell over her shoulders. She looked so delicate, yet assertive. Zidane felt his stomach clench.

“You’d be amazed,” Garnet told him, seating herself at the desk and getting situated. “Sometimes it’s people all the way to the other end of the room. And they can get quite impatient. That is why every civilian has three minutes to present their proposal or submit their complaint.”

“Is this one of your essential duties?” Zidane asked, coming closer to the desk. Garnet had begun dating the top of her parchment. Her handwriting was as graceful as she was.

“My mother and father used to do this, yes, but my mother postponed them all after his death and, as you know, things were disrupted for some time,” Garnet said. “But I thought it would only be right to continue with them. I do want to be the best Queen I can be for these people.”

“Well, I’d say you’re doing a good job, Your Majesty.”

Garnet smiled briefly before looking back to her task. “I suppose I could get used to a personal bodyguard such as yourself. Steiner can be... strict... I will pretend that’s the right word.” Garnet laid her quill down. “But from what I’ve heard, you’re very capable and something about you is very laid-back. I like that, Zeke.”

Zidane felt incredibly warm in his armor. He almost quivered. Since the moment he had woken up, he had thought endlessly of this girl. Those bold dark eyes and pale complexion. That melodious voice and her kind soul. And now, he was facing it all again behind what felt like iron bars. Zidane wanted to be with Garnet so badly. But he couldn’t. He couldn’t burden her. He didn’t want to be the King. How could he? Didn’t they all remember what

he was? Finally, he realized the silence had been quite prolonged.

“I hope I can accommodate your standards, Your Majesty.”

In the next moment, a soldier from Squad Beatrix appeared in the door. “Your Majesty, it is time.”

“Escort them in, please.”

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The smell of bacon and sausage roused Beatrix from her sleep. She emerged from her slumber, like resurfacing in raging waters. Another night, another stressful barrage of unconscious babble coming at her from all directions. Zidane’s face, Garnet’s tears, Blank’s anger, and now... a baby. The General propped herself up in bed, absorbing the world sinking in around her. She placed her hand to her flat stomach wondering how in the world a baby could be inside of her. Sometimes she wondered if the doctor had made a mistake. But she couldn’t ignore the tell-tale symptoms that washed over her. It frightened the General, to the very core of her, that for the first time, she didn’t know what to do. Beatrix had always lead others. But this circumstance had her plagued with a feeling of being



misguided. She was nearly thirty. A woman of her age did not have children. Especially war-mongers such as herself. How could she possibly raise this child right? Without resentment, without confusion, without sadness? Despite growing life inside her, she couldn't find a fiber in her being that wished to be maternal. Would she remember to hug the child as much as possible? Express herself to them? What if she couldn't? How was she magically supposed to know what to do? Other women made it look so simple. But Beatrix was frightened she'd be no better than her own mother.

“Ah, you're awake,” Beatrix turned her head to see Steiner, dressed in only his tunic and slacks, holding a tray of food. “Hungry?”

Beatrix furrowed her brow, looking to the clock on the wall. “It's after eight! What about the Civil Meeting?”

“Don't worry,” Steiner said, sitting on the edge of the bed and setting the tray in Beatrix's lap. She couldn't say it didn't look good. Crispy bacon, plump sausage links, golden sunny-side up eggs, with toast and jelly. Beatrix's stomach was growling instantly. ‘I was waiting for you to get up to tell you something.’ He turned to her on the bed as she took

a bite out of the toast. “There will be more explaining to do this evening, but right now, I wanted to let you know, I’ve made space in my schedule for you. Whether it’s to cover your shift or be here for you. I know things are somewhat confusing, maybe even scary right now but... I’m here for you, Beatrix.”

“But how did you do that?” Beatrix asked. “The Knights of Pluto are already stretched so thin.”

“That’s what I will explain this evening.”

“Steiner, you’re talking in riddles,” Beatrix made a face as she reached for a slice of bacon.

“Well, I feel like I’m living in one,” Steiner smiled and for a moment, Beatrix felt okay.

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The Civil Meeting adjourned at eleven o’clock sharp. As Garnet scribbled the last of her notes across the parchment, she looked up and blinked rapidly. She gazed all across the room, seeing only Zidane, who was closing the doors. Garnet stood, her chair scraping backwards, and she looked at the approaching soldier almost perplexed. “Everyone’s gone?” Garnet asked, furrowing her dark brow.

“Yeah, you spoke to everyone,” Zidane told her.

“Really?” Garnet now arched her eyebrows. “That’s never happened before, Zeke. And... and everyone was in relatively good spirits when they spoke to me. What were you doing back there? I saw an awful lot of shuffling, but I could never see what you were up to.”

“I was just talking to the civilians, I hope that was alright,” Zidane sheepishly rubbed the nape of his neck, tilting his helmet over his eyes. “Tell ’em a joke or so, let them know we’re working as hard as we can to make sure we hear them. Just little things like that.”

“Zeke, I just...” Garnet paused for a moment. “You’re brilliant, you know that? Steiner never much converses with them. He can be rather shy, I believe. That was the easiest Civil Meeting I think I’ve ever held before. Mullenkedheim was not over exaggerating when he told me about you.”

“It is my honor, Your Majesty,” Zidane saluted. “What is next on the agenda for today?”

“Oh, right,” Garnet reached for it. ‘I’m meeting with a florist before lunch.’ Garnet came around the desk and Zidane was quick to follow, being sure not

to step on her skirt. He couldn't help but think she should wear green more often. "I believe I mentioned to you and Laudo we were making a memorial in the garden for a friend of mine." Zidane stiffened upon hearing those words, but kept at a steady pace beside her. "How much do you know about the war, Zeke?"

"I lived in Lindblum at the time when it was attacked," Zidane told her, quite easily. He was so nervous, it was easier to pretend to be someone else entirely.

Garnet stared forward a moment, slowly blinking with her full lashes. "I'm sorry if you lost anything or anyone you loved. I am only glad we can rebuild from what happened. And learn to accept what we had to do during that time. My wise friend once said that with all the problems in the world, you'd think there would be more solutions. There's not, unfortunately. But we can learn to make do with the solutions we do have." Zidane lowered his eyes. Garnet had been awake that night?

"Sounds like a smart guy," Zidane finally said.

"He was," Garnet folded her hands in front of her as they descended towards the front foyer. "In many

ways, he was my hero. And I'll be sure nobody ever forgets him."

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The crickets were chirping and the sky was a moody mixture of blacks and purple by the time Zidane was heading back for the barracks. The Queen had many things on her agenda each day. He had no idea how Garnet could do it all with such grace. He was muddled within himself as he meandered through the garden rather mindlessly. Garnet seemed to be thriving. Her job was hard, but she kept her delicate poise, as usual. She was pleasant to talk to. His job was almost too overwhelming. His heart wanted to explode because of how much he loved her, but his brain controlled him, and reminded him constantly that he would only hurt her more. Zidane had dug his grave it felt like. Now all there was left to do was fall into it. The glowing barrack finally appeared from around a hedge and Zidane sighed, tilting his head down.

"Soldier!" Zidane staggered for a moment before turning and saluting. His heart thundered in his chest as Beatrix and Steiner appeared in the lemony pool of light. "Do you have a moment for the General?"

“Yes, sir, of course,” Zidane nodded.

“Our barracks, now,” Steiner gestured for him to follow. Zidane was exhausted and didn’t even have the mental capacity to refuse. He followed, holding in a sigh. The least amount of people who knew, the better, he reminded himself. Beatrix, however, was more trustworthy than the loud-mouthed panicking Captain. But having to justify himself to Beatrix was much harder. Zidane hated himself in that moment. He was doing exactly what he didn’t want to happen; burden the people he loved. But he couldn’t defy who he was, who he so desperately despised and wanted rid from him. They stepped into the small quarters that were surrounded by budding daisies and lilies. It was warm in the modest home and smelled of peppermint. Zidane was taken into the common room that had a few plush seats and a couch, along with a cabinet of china Steiner had inherited from his grandmother. ‘Beatrix,’ Steiner pursed his lips. “You remember the impressive soldier, Zeke, right? He’s done so well in his week on the squad, that I believed he was the key to helping spare me of duties so I may spend my time more efficiently.”

“He’s the personal attendant for Queen Garnet?” Beatrix again inspected his armor from head to toe.

“Steiner, no offense, but he’s only been with us for, like you said, a *week*. I would have selected Haagen or Mullenkedheim for the position. Zeke is better suited for patrol.”

“There’s a better reason why,” Steiner told her, gingerly touching her arm. He nodded to Zidane and the young man took a deep breath. Slowly, he removed his helmet. Beatrix gasped sharply.

“This is a sick joke,” Beatrix shook her head. Her heart was suddenly racing. “Zidane? What happened to your hair?”

“I got a haircut,” Zidane said, holding his helmet beneath his arm. In the next moment, Beatrix surged forward, slapping him across the face. “Yowch!” Zidane hissed, touching his glazed cheek.

“Beatrix!” Steiner wheeled her backwards.

“Where the hell have you been!?” Beatrix cried out. ‘I’ve been looking for you personally for nine months! And Steiner!’ She turned towards him, curling her hands into fists. The Captain nearly flinched. “You’ve known *all day* Zidane’s been walking around with the Queen and told no one? We must alert Her Majesty at once.”

“Beatrix, no,” Zidane threw his helmet on the couch and reached for her now. “Please, Beatrix. Nobody can know I’m alive.”

“And why not?” Beatrix shook her head. “Do you have any idea how many people are mourning you?”

“Yeah, I’m mournin’ myself, too,” Zidane said, his face very hard. “I have my reasons, Beatrix. Just let me keep my job, please. When the time is right, I’ll know.”

Beatrix took in a deep breath, pacing away from the two. “You’re not making any sense, Zidane. Her Majesty needs you. You’re really just going to watch her from the shadows?”

“What can I do to help her if I can’t even help myself?” Zidane pressed his hand to his chest plate, furrowing his brow. “Maybe I need to refresh your memory, but don’t you remember how close we came to the end of this world? I was an instrument of it.”

“That’s foolishness,” Beatrix turned to him. “That’s all over now, Zidane. You’re not some acclaimed Angel of Death anymore.”

“That doesn’t change my origin or what makes up the inside of me,” Zidane’s voice was very tense.



“Trust me, Beatrix, I’m more a burden than anything. I don’t know what the hell has happened in the past year, but I’m trying to learn, okay? No need to interrupt progress if we don’t have to. Dagger’s a great Queen. I don’t want to stand in her way.”

“Your metaphorical gravestone does that for you,” Beatrix crossed her arms over her chest.

“Are you in or am I fired?” Zidane held his arms out at his side. Steiner only watched in a rigid manner. “Just give me some time, Beatrix. Everyone has to come to terms with who they really are. Give me that decency, at least.”

“I’ll play your game for a bit,” Beatrix told him, a swell of emotions of all kinds washing over her. “But if you’re stalling just to piddle around, I will not hesitate to speak to the Queen. For the record, I think this is stupid, Zidane.”

“Well, good,” Zidane grinned. “That makes two of you.”

“I guess I forgot how stubborn and noble you really are,” Beatrix shook her head and then sighed. “It’s good to have you, however, soldier. And now I

don't have to review Breireicht's administrative skills. It all makes sense after all."

Zidane's smile was crooked as he looked between Beatrix and Steiner. Maybe it'd be alright, after all. Now, it was really all up to him. And he felt the weight of it all teetering on his tired shoulders.

# Chapter Nine

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## Chapter Nine

“Come on, Zeke, spill the details!” Weimar plead, ripping his dinner roll in half. Just beyond the windows, the rain pelted the glass and lightning lit the dark garden up. Zidane sighed as he cut into his warm steak. Around him, the soldiers laughed and chatted, coming down from their soggy day of patrol. Mullenkedheim snickered as Zidane continued eating, leaving Weimar absolutely exasperated. ‘Just tell me a little bit about the work, please!’ Weimar continued, nearly crushing the bread in his hands. “What’s it like being the Queen’s Bodyguard?!”

“I genuinely would like to know,” Haagen said from beside Zidane. “I’ve been on the force for over a decade and haven’t even spent a fraction of the time you have with the Queen.”

“It’s nothing too exciting,” Zidane replied, looking up from his dinner. Weimar leaned in, ready to absorb any word. “I just follow her around while she does her errands.”

“But does she talk to you?” Weimar asked eagerly.

“Well, yeah,” Zidane shrugged, reaching for his water. “Not about anything too—”

“Is she brilliant?” Weimar came further across the table. “Is her voice cute? Is she funny? What does her laugh sound like? Is she interested in anything?”

Laudo looked up from where he wrote on paper crammed between plates. “Of course she’s brilliant, you moron. She’s the Queen.”

“Since when does being born royal make you a genius?” Weimar shot back.

“Well, the blood in her body actually surges towards her brain, unlike yours,” Laudo went back to writing.

“I’m just curious what she’s like,” Weimar looked towards Zidane. “What *does* she do all day, anyway?”

“She writes a lot of letters,” Zidane told him. “And she signs her name on a lot of papers.”

“What does she smell like?”

Zidane pursed his lips and pushed his dinner back, standing up from the table. He glanced towards the stormy night as he went to the commons room, seating himself in the chair by the window. Through the muggy haze of slanted rain, he could see the dark glowing castle standing firm in the weather. Zidane felt so tense. Being Garnet's personal bodyguard was hard. The work was easy enough, but the worst part was looking at her. Listening to her speak, even if she was muttering to herself. She was so close, yet so far away. Zidane cursed at himself daily. How could he let this happen? He wanted so desperately to throw off his burdens, but no matter how much he tried, he couldn't shake them. How could he convince himself of his pure intentions when still, he brought suffering to those around him? Steiner and Beatrix seemed to have enough on their plates and yet he forced them into this lie, this charade. He really was the reaper of sorrow, he told himself. Garland wasn't a failure like he wanted to believe. Zidane truly felt he lived up to his standards, even in the most menial ways. Every day, Zidane woke up and hoped to his deepest innards he felt ready to be himself again. But he never was. He receded into the shell that was Zeke Tisdoll and prepared himself for another day in a lie. What would it take to convince him, he often

wondered. How could he prove he could be more? How could he return to his friends in one whole piece? How could he stop dwelling on the past? He pursed his lips as thunder rolled by overhead.

“Hey,” He looked up to see Haagen grinning and holding a wet glass of golden ale out towards him. Zidane took it into his hands and watched as Haagen settled into a nearby chair with his own drink. “Don’t let Weimar get you all worked up. I bet your job is hard and I’m guessin’ you aren’t at liberty to say much.”

“I don’t know,” Zidane looked back towards the raging spring storm outside. “I’m still learning the ins and outs. I just don’t have a lot to say about it, I guess.”

“Makes a soldier wonder, though,” Haagen said after a foamy sip of his drink. “Captain Steiner’s been takin’ a backseat recently.”

“Yeah,” Zidane shrugged, deciding to try his ale.

“I got a theory,” Haagen grinned. Zidane looked to him with arched eyebrows. “Hey, I’ve seen a lot in my day and I know a lot about the Cap’n.”

“Go on,” Zidane nodded.

“Keep this hush-hush, alright?” Haagen leaned in towards Zidane. “I think General Beatrix got knocked up. Of course, Captain Steiner would be the daddy, then, so he’s reducing his schedule.”

“What?” Zidane cocked his head to the side. “Beatrix, a mom? I don’t think so, Haagen.”

“I have a son of my own,” Haagen told him. “I know what a pregnant woman looks like.”

“I saw her last night, she was as thin as she’s always been,” Zidane shook his head.

“You’re too young,” Haagen sat back, drinking more of his ale. “You wouldn’t know what to look for to realize a woman’s with child.”

Zidane furrowed his brow, watching the parade of lightning strikes across the sanguine sky. Steiner and Beatrix? A baby? It all sounded ludicrous for Zidane. Beatrix was too much of an accomplished war general to ever be caught being the maternal type. And Steiner? Zidane could almost laugh at the idea of him being a father. He knew them too well. They could never be parents. Haagen was just gossiping, Zidane told himself. But it did make him wonder. Haagen had been around for quite some time. Could he really tell? Was that what Steiner’s

secret really was? Zidane still couldn't help but feel doubtful. A baby seemed much too crazy of an idea.

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The next day, the rain still hadn't let up. That meant both the florist and blacksmith canceled their appointments with Garnet in the garden. Zidane was somewhat relieved to watch Garnet strike it off the to-do list. It was incredibly hard to stand at attention and listen to people plan his gravestone. He watched as Garnet looked through her agenda as they occupied a chamber where she had just finished speaking with a union of tailors and seamstresses who were upset about import taxes. Garnet seemed like she was all too familiar, and at a loss, with the situation. She looked up, gazing across the room at where Zidane stood by the wall.

"That was everything on my agenda," She told him, standing up. "For once I have an afternoon where I can choose what I would like to do."

"Well, I hope you like puzzles on a rainy day," Zidane replied evenly. It had become easier to talk to her over the past week, but he couldn't quite stop the body quivers.



“Unfortunately, there’s always work to do,” Garnet grinned. She collected her documents, pressing them to her chest. ‘The parcel delivery came this morning. I should go to my private study to see what disarray it’s in. Perhaps you could help me sort the letters by matter. It’s not too tedious a procedure.’ Zidane was quick to open the door for the Queen and together, they began up the spiraling stairs. As their feet met the polished checkered marble floors, Zidane recounted it was where they had first met. He was even wearing the same get-up. Somethings never changed, it seemed. “You know, I think I’m going to ask the maids to bring the phonograph to my private study. It’s always sitting so lonely in the tea room. I think I’d get much more use of listening to music while I work.”

“I heard music boosts productivity,” Zidane told her. “I always wanted one as a kid.”

“Oh, I need all the productivity I can get,” Garnet said, looking to Zidane’s tilted head as he held the next door open for her.

“I can send for it now,” Zidane offered as they began down the long narrow hallway. “Maybe we’ll sort faster.”

Garnet laughed lightly. “Oh, Zeke, you’re always so attentive. That would be most...” Suddenly, brassy bells began ringing throughout the castle and the duo came to an abrupt halt in the corridor. Zidane wasn’t quite sure what the bells signified, but Garnet seemed more annoyed than concerned, so he removed his hand from the hilt of his sword. Garnet drooped and sighed, shuffling the papers against her torso. “It would seem an airship is docking.”

“Wow,” Zidane glanced upwards towards the clanging noise. “Quite an elaborate declaration. Were you expecting anyone?”

Garnet huffed and continued forward. Quickly, Zidane scrambled to follow her as she went on towards the private study. “I’m never expecting my Aunt Hilda. She comes for fun or when Uncle Cid is driving her up the wall. Her castle is twice the size of mine. I find it hard to believe she can’t go somewhere away from him. It’s always here.” Together, they entered the quiet study with multiple wall-length windows, showing off the gloomy day outside. The parcel delivery was quite massive. There were several boxes wrapped delicately in brown paper and huge stacks of letters tied together with string. Zidane came to a stack, tugging at the

string to see a paper requesting subsidization for an educational program.

“Is this a larger than usual delivery?” Zidane asked as, finally, the brassy bells faded away. He glanced towards the shelves to see an array of old books and several knick-knacks.

“No,” Garnet told him, setting her documents on her disorganized desk. “This is quite typical. Twice a week.”

“Jeez...” Zidane said, using his hunting knife to cut the string free. “How do you ever get it all done?”

“Well,” Garnet came to stand across the table from Zidane. Her slender hands worked delicately at the knot on her papers. Behind her, a bolt of lightning illuminated her raven black hair. Zidane watched her for a moment, remembering the very way her body would sway as she did things. He recalled her grace that boundlessly followed her. ‘That’s just the thing,’ She looked up through her dark bangs, causing Zidane’s heart to rivet. “You never actually finish. You just keep going.”

Zidane pulled a few papers from the stack, looking among them. “We got somethin’ about

education, tax breaks on traveling merchants...”

“Yes, anything with the word tax in it should have its own pile,” Garnet instructed. “Education is a civilian matter, we’ll just start a stack over here.”

“Water pollution?”

“Civilian matter.”

“Request for building permit and inspection?”

“Contracts,” Garnet told him, rummaging through her own stack and sorting quietly.

“What about the packages?” Zidane asked as he began to understand the sorting method.

“Hm?” Garnet arched her eyebrows. “Oh, it’s usually just dried meats, occasional fabric samples from a seamstress I never requested, or sometimes even chocolates. I wish my people didn’t feel the need to send such treats. I often feel guilty receiving them.”

“Well, it must mean you’re doing a good job and they like you,” Zidane told her, placing another contract down for a basement renovation.

“Oh, Zeke, you’re too kind,” Garnet said, passing another paper into the tax pile.

As Zidane lifted the next contract, he began to skim it for keywords. But the rigid handwriting stuck out at him. He slowed down, looking towards the bottom of the page. He felt his heart thundering ferociously. *Please write me back. Blank.* Zidane read the paragraph. It felt like it took him forever to finish it. His mouth felt dry and he glanced to Garnet who was still absorbed in sorting. He cleared his throat, but the lump didn't go away. "Is there a stack for... someone requesting a search and rescue convoy?"

Garnet looked up immediately, pausing from her task. "Let me see that," She said, reaching for it. After a moment she pursed her lips and nodded. "This one is important. It... it technically doesn't belong in a stack."

"But... isn't that the same person you're building a monument for?" Zidane asked, bile stinging the back of his throat. "Why would you go looking for him after all this time if you think he's dead?"

Garnet's face was very still as she looked to the storm come down against the castle walls. She furrowed her brow, clutching the paper in both hands. "I want to honor him but... I don't want to give up on him. It's... difficult to put into words,

Zeke, I'm sorry," Garnet shook her head, gingerly setting the paper down on the table. "Have you ever lost somebody you loved?"

Zidane gripped the edge of the table, tilting his head down. "Yes."

"Then you understand the ridiculous nature of dealing with a broken heart," Garnet told him. 'The unanswered questions, the unending doubt, and the repetitive nights of counting out every different scenario that could have happened but, ultimately, never will.' The two were quiet for a moment, only thunder and the pelts of rain filling the room. "I'm sorry, Zeke. I shouldn't prod at your own wounds. I'm sorry for your loss. I'm sure they will very important to you and I know they would be proud of you and what you're doing."

"I'm sorry, too, Your Majesty," Zidane said, genuinely meaning it.

Garnet grinned lightly. "Just know, anytime something is on your mind, I'm willing to lend an ear. Especially if you have to follow me around all day." She laughed, reaching for another paper. "You probably joined the Knights of Pluto looking for some action and instead, you were glued to desk duty with the Queen."

“Well, it sure beats moping about in the rain,” Zidane chuckled, continuing to sort as well.

“I think I’ll open this package,” Garnet said, reaching for the closest box. “Some chocolate really would lighten the mood, wouldn’t you agree?” She began tugging at the tense string.

“Oh, here, let me,” Zidane pulled his knife out and reached across the table. For a brief moment, their hands grazed each other. He felt like he could feel her skin through his gloves. He gave the string a pull and it snapped. Garnet finished unwrapping the rest of it.

“Ah-hah! It was chocolate. Lucky guess.” Garnet smiled, opening the bright blue box to uncover molded chocolates of various marblings and colors. They gleamed in the afternoon storm. Tenderly, she plucked one from the delicate cheese cloth and was about to place it in her mouth, when footsteps and voices could be heard in the hallway. Garnet sighed, lowering the chocolate back into the box. “It seems my Aunt Hilda has found me.”

“Want me to intercept them?” Zidane asked, turning for the door.

“There’s honestly nothing you can do,” Garnet told him, placing the box of chocolates on her desk.

A beat passed before there came a knock on the door and it opened briskly just after that. “Yoo-hoo, darling! I’m here!” Lady Hilda sung out, the white lace of her hat falling around the frame of her powdered round face. ‘And I’ve brought guests! You remember Lady Shari, don’t you? And of course, we brought Liam, too!’ Hilda stepped aside to allow the short plump woman and tall broad-shouldered man into the room. “Oh, what’s this, darling?” Hilda clucked and gestured towards the messy table of paper. “It’s well after two o’clock and you’re as busy as a bee still! Do you ever take a moment to have tea and a scone, perhaps?”

“There’s no time right now,” Garnet told her, returning to the table and continuing with sorting. “It’s a very busy time of the year, Aunt Hilda. I really wish you had sent a message beforehand. I would have had treats and refreshments prepared for your arrival.”

“How could you not be expecting me?” Lady Hilda seemed somewhat offended. “The Airship Ball is only three days away. I’ve brought Liam so you two can color coordinate. You two will look so



dashing walking down those stairs together! Cid will have no reason not to promote Liam to the piloting and testing crew!”

Zidane kept his head tilted down, busying himself with the documents.

“Come on, darling,” Hilda said. “Let’s send for some tea and go for a dress fitting.”

“Aunt Hilda, I’m up to my elbows in work right now,” Garnet replied.

“Darling,” Hilda gripped her arm and leaned in so Shari and Liam could not hear. But Zidane could. He kept his eyes directed down in the shadows of his helmet. ‘If you’d only play nicely you wouldn’t have to be the only person heading this kingdom.’ Garnet’s face didn’t even move when she said that. “Look, I see you have an assistant now. I believe this young man can be left to the devices. It won’t take much time, darling, honest.”

Garnet sighed and looked across the table at Zidane. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Not a problem, Your Majesty,” Zidane said, turning to look at the man who had entered the room. His dark disheveled hair gleamed in the

lightning strikes beyond the window. He was nearly an entire head taller than Zidane.

“Oh, good, darling, let’s get to work!” Hilda whisked her from the table quickly. ‘I’m feeling peckish, darling. Would you mind asking the chefs to make some lamb chops and mint sauce? Oh, I’m so excited, Shari!’ Hilda draped her arms around her friends shoulders. “Garnet and Liam will be the most dazzling couple there is to see at the ball!”

The door shut promptly behind them, encasing Zidane into silence. A crack of thunder rang out as he listened to their footsteps fade away. He let out a sigh, pulling his helmet off. He raked his molded hair backwards and went to the window, watching the slanted rain come down endlessly, like the sorrow that was drowning his insides. Garnet had a prospective suitor. One who was tall, dark, and handsome at that. A successful engineer it sounded like. Garnet may have missed Zidane, but he was convinced with enough time, she could love again. Especially if he was as persistent as Lady Hilda was. Zidane felt his insides tug. He could put it all to a stop that moment if he wanted to. But something inside him told him *no*. Maybe this Liam guy was better suited for her. He seemed smart and decent. Zidane sighed, rubbing at his face. After a moment,

he put his helmet back on and slumped into a stool, continuing to miserably sort out the letters.

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The moment the Squad Beatrix meeting was adjourned, Beatrix bolted from the barracks that sat in the opposite corner from the men's. She walked as fast as she could, doing her best to smooth her face despite its curling. She didn't look to a single guard on patrol, not even the ones who greeted her or offered her an umbrella in the dreary weather. Beatrix continued surging forward, splashing through puddles, and wetting the cuffs of her pants. She wasn't going to make it, she told herself and her knees buckled just to the left of the waterfront courtyard. She staggered to the bushes and vomited. Beatrix hoped she was out of ear shot of the soldiers in the plaza. She felt like hell and increasingly every day was desperate for relief from the coming and going symptoms. She didn't want to do this anymore, but unfortunately, she was only eleven weeks into a nearly forty-week roller coaster. Her wet hair stuck to her flushed cheeks as finally her retching stopped. She lifted her faint head, glad to see nobody was around. She hurried on through the rain, the nausea still floating after her. Beatrix

barreled around a corner, running directly into Steiner.

“There you are,” Steiner said, gripping her elbow. “How was the meeting?”

“Typical,” Beatrix told him, edging towards their barracks.

“How are you feeling?” He asked.

“Just fine,” She replied.

“Are you sure?” Steiner furrowed his brow. “You look pale.”

“I said I’m fine, dammit,” Beatrix pulled herself from his touch. “I’m pregnant, not incapable, Steiner.” And with that, she whirled around and raced inside, firmly shutting the door behind her.

Steiner pursed his lips and only watched the door, the rain thumping down onto his armor. Beatrix had grown incredibly emotional, rightfully so. But it still had Steiner worried for her. He knew she was exasperated and frustrated. He understood she was scared, though she’d never truly admit it. He was, too. In recent days, he wondered how this would truly affect their relationship. Steiner began his walk towards the castle, glancing to the rustling hedges in

the windy spring storm. Could he and Beatrix confidently raise this child? Would Beatrix only grow to resent him? That thought scared him the most. What if she blamed him for all of this? What if this child ruins their life? Steiner shook his head at his internal conversation as he entered the castle. He removed his hat and shook it of rain before continuing up the stairs. A child was a blessing, Steiner told himself. It was proof the world wasn't all bad. How could this child possibly ruin his life? What a selfish thought, he told himself. Steiner passed Laudo, only giving him a curt nod as he brushed by and entered the private corridor. He felt so utterly direction-less as he opened the door to the private study.

Only one soldier occupied the room. They were busy neatly stacking papers and making labels per pile. They looked up when they saw the door open. Steiner glanced towards the hallway and then closed the door behind him. "Zidane? What are you doing here all by yourself? Where's Her Majesty?"

"A dress fitting with Lady Hilda and... her new boyfriend," Zidane answered with a deflated tone, moving a stack of papers to Garnet's desk.

“New boyfriend?” Steiner crossed the room. “What in the hell are you talking about?”

“Lady Hilda’s friend’s son,” Zidane told him, continuing to sort and fix the parchments. “Liam, Regent Cid’s star engineer. Mister Tall-Dark-and-Handsome.”

“My, you certainly have green eyes for someone who didn’t want Her Majesty to know your true identity.”

Zidane pulled his helmet off, grounding his teeth together for a moment. On his head, his brown hair was disheveled and wild. “Well, what’s wrong with you? You came in with a mooney face, too. Did Beatrix yell at you?”

“I wish it were that simple,” Steiner muttered. “When will Her Majesty return?”

“Beats me,” Zidane tossed his helmet on the table and continued working.

“Well, how has everything been for the past few days?”

“Nothing crazy to report,” Zidane told him, keeping his eyes lowered. ‘Dagger finishes her agenda and that’s a wrap.’ Steiner pursed his lips for

a moment and came around the table. He also began to sort. “What’d you do on your little three day vacation?” Zidane asked, setting a paper in a stack. “Read any good books?”

“It was very relaxing,” Steiner said plainly, recalling every morning awakening to retching and tears.

Zidane paused from his task, lifting his head. “Steiner, is Beatrix pregnant?”

“What?!” Steiner’s cheeks began to grow red hot and he looked at Zidane with quivering hands. “What would make you ask such a thing?”

“Well, some of the guys were just kind of speculating...”

“Who?” Steiner insisted.

“I’m not namin’ names,” Zidane shook his head. “It just got me thinking... is that why you’re taking time off? Is that why I’m here right now, sorting contracts?”

“Nonsense,” Steiner told him. “There are many problems with the structure of the Knights of Pluto. I am only taking time to fine-tune our team so Squad

Beatrix can stop teasing my men. Alexandria has grown. It is time we adjust accordingly.”

Zidane pursed his lips. “Mhm... whatever you say, Steiner.”

“Damn you,” Steiner hissed. “You have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about, Zidane.”

“Keep it down, will you?” Zidane glanced towards the door. “Dagger could be standing right on the other side. I didn’t mean to offend you, jeez.”

They both continued sorting for a moment, listening to the rain pelt against the glass. Finally, Steiner sighed. “Can you keep a secret?”

Zidane grinned, looking across the table at him. “Oh, you have no idea.”



# Chapter Ten

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## Chapter Ten

The Lindblum Castle was filled with all kinds of airships. The colors were a great parade across the sky and the children climbed trellises and ladders to get a view of the long steady line awaiting access to the dock. Balloons filled the city and shops offered discounts on merchandise in honor of the engineering team of Lindblum that they felt kept them safe and their economy ever-moving. Crowds gathered on the bridge, like with every festivity, to watch the airships soar above. No matter how usual a sight it was in Lindblum, people seemingly never got over the joy of flight. They brought binoculars and the children ran up and down the breezeway as if they were fast powered machines.

“That one right there is Treno, with the dark purples,” A grandfather told his grandson. The young boy peered excitedly through a pair of binoculars. “Right behind it is none other than Burmecia. Notice in the bottom corner, the flag of Cleyra is there, too?”

The boy nodded, turning his binoculars across the sky. “Look, Pop-Pop! It’s Alexandria!” He lowered the binoculars and looked to his grandfather. “Mom got me *all* the Royal Action Figures in the Alexandrian collection.”

“Hmm,” The old man stroked his beard. “But what about the Lindblum Action Figures?”

“Regent Cid’s really hard to find,” The boy pursed his lips. “My favorite, though, is the General Beatrix Action Figure! She’s so cool with her eye patch!”

“Well, son, we have to make a stop at the toy store on the way home,” He said, placing a hand to his shoulder. The grandson grinned widely and looked through his binoculars again.

Just beside the duo, standing at the fine stone railing, were three slender girls watching the sky. “Finally... it’s time,” One with inky raven hair said. Her dark eyes and bold brow were set upon an olive heart shaped face. She looked to the other girls, pursing her ruby red lips. “All those months of working those horrid events for not even a glance or a little secret... well, it’s all paid off.”

A girl with tanned skin glanced at her. “And you’re certain Queen Garnet is on the ship?”

“Of course,” The dark haired girl replied, looking back towards the crest of Alexandria. “She’ll be dangling on the arm of the lead engineer of the *Blue Rose*.”

“Well then...” The petite blond girl shrugged. “Let’s get to the castle and put our server uniforms on.”

The olive skinned girl smiled deviously, looking to her companions. “It’s pay day, girls.”

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When Garnet emerged from her airship, the docking area was crowded with rich noble people shaking hands and greeting each other before funneling down the stairs towards the ballroom. Voices and laughter echoed upwards. Journalists stood ready, scribbling name after name of arrivals. When the Queen of Alexandria was spotted, however, in a fashionable powder pink ball gown glittering with gems, the journalists surged forward. “Your Majesty! Your Majesty! Will you confront Regent Cid over the growing tensions in the fashion and tailoring world?” They called out. ‘What is the

relationship between you and Sir Liam Winters?’ Came another. “Does Alexandria have intentions of expanding state lines?”

Steiner was quick to shoo them back, escorting Garnet onto the wide platform, which seemed small in the luxuriously grand high ceiling room. Many nobles glanced to Garnet, casting smiles and dainty waves. Garnet looked to Steiner. “You never escort me to these kinds of events. You think they’re all gaudy and a waste of time. Isn’t this Beatrix’s job?”

“I wanted Beatrix to whip my soldiers into shape,” Steiner told her. “When they get off shift, they’ll have a mighty physical to contend with.”

“Oh, those poor souls.”

Because she was to be escorted down the stairs, Garnet was directed towards a corridor to a room filled with everyone she knew. Her fluffy skirt ballooned through the door and in the next moment, Lady Hilda squealed in an octave unknown to human kind. Eiko winced at the familiar sound, glancing to Vivi who only watched with his wide golden eyes. Lady Hilda herself was dressed in a skirt that was fluffier than the human body was accustomed to. Her sweet blond hair was braided

eccentrically in wraps around her head. She reached for Garnet's slender hands, smiling widely.

"Oh, darling, you make Charlton and Co look so divine. Liam's matching tie is absolutely splendid. All eyes will be on the both of you."

"That's exactly what I don't want," Garnet told her coolly. Steiner detached from her side to greet Vivi with great vigor. "This gala is about the airship engineers. It has nothing to do with me."

"Sweetheart, I swear, I don't understand where you get this modest attitude," Hilda placed her hands on her hips. "I understand traveling is a humble experience, but you have every reason to be in the spotlight. Especially since a lead engineer fancies you. I imagine you and Liam will have quite the magical evening."

Garnet's stomach constricted at the thought and she turned her eyes away, spotting Freya and Sir Fratley posted up beside a tall wall-length window. Garnet didn't want to have a magical evening with anybody but Zidane. It only made her heart wrench even more. It would be impossible, she told herself. She would never get that chance again to sit beneath an open night sky beside him, listening to him tell her tales of the world. She would never again have

the moment to roll her eyes at his charming, yet misplaced, remarks. She had no one to dart to when things went wrong. She was missing the safety of having someone who would always show up at the right moment. Garnet felt like she was missing something entirely crucial.

“If you’ll excuse me, I’d like to make my rounds with my friends,” Garnet told Hilda with somewhat of a strained voice. Quietly, she parted from her aunt, who placed her hands on her hips and watched the stiff girl go. Garnet went towards Freya, who was dressed in a long white silky dress. It flowed around her slender and rigid body, accompanied by a flower crown with her ashen hair pooling out from beneath. Freya was taking a sip of a fizzling drink, but stopped and greeted Garnet with a smile. The Queen, however, hugged her. The two held each other for a few beats and tenderly, Freya ran her hand up and down Garnet’s back. “It’s good to see you,” Garnet said, as they finally parted.

“The same to you,” Freya nodded, pushing a lock of hair from her startling blue eyes. “It’s amazing to realize we’re really an entire year out from the whole ordeal now... This event is a very sobering thought since we’re all being honored.”

“Yes,” Garnet replied, glancing towards the beautiful day outside that was beginning to wane into evening. “It’s quite the feat. Though, I wish I wasn’t being honored.”

“Why not?” Freya shook her head. “You did the most for your kingdom. We each had our own identity to protect.”

Garnet shrugged, rather uselessly. “I suppose I should be grateful. I guess I don’t really want to be here.”

Freya gave her glass a small swirl, peaking at Garnet through her ashen bangs. “Because of Zidane, right? I get it, Dagger. We all probably feel the same as you. Why should we be honored when the leader of our group didn’t even come back?” Freya sighed and glanced towards Sir Fratley. “It’s a long road to recovery. But... we’ll get there someday. Just as Burmecia will be whole again, too. We’ll find our happiness and perhaps our peace, too.”

Garnet stood beside Freya, scanning her eyes against the thin group of honored guests. The airship engineers in their crisp navy blue blazers with golden tassels and buttons were beginning to trickle in. “I don’t think I’ll ever stop blaming myself.”

Freya crossed her arms over her chest, joining Garnet in the people watching. “You say that now... but with time. You know that,” Freya threw a fleeting glance her direction. “How’s the memorial coming? Did the blacksmith accept my design?”

“I’m sorry, I’ve been meaning to write,” Garnet told her, cocking her head back to look at the tall Dragoon. “Yes, your design was accepted. It’s been raining, however, so the blacksmith hasn’t made a start quite yet. He’s predicting it to be finished by the end of spring.”

“Hm,” Freya grinned. “I should just send a Burmecian blacksmith to do the job. We know how to work in the rain.” Garnet and Freya shared a smile between the two of them.

In the next moment, Eiko flounced over in a dark purple gown with a black velvet waistband. Her long purple hair had been confined into a braid down the nape of her neck, a black headband accenting the amazing color. Her big blue eyes glanced over her shoulder as she pressed her hand to Garnet’s waist, nodding her head. “Is that him, Dagger?” Garnet looked towards where Eiko was gesturing, feeling her insides grow cold. There was Liam in his freshly pressed engineer uniform. He had several more



golden stars and enamel pins than the other's. His black boots were shiny as they peaked out beneath his navy slacks with a dark black ribbon running down the sides. As usual, his brown hair was disheveled, clawing across his bold brow.

“Yes, that’s Liam,” Garnet nodded.

“Your date?” Freya arched her eyebrows.

“Escort,” Garnet corrected her. “I had no choice in the say. It’s all a publicity stunt for Aunt Hilda. Liam is the son of one of her closest friends.”

“Sounds to me like you’re being arranged,” Freya commented, taking another sip of her drink.

“I won’t let that happen,” Garnet shook her head. “He’s nice but... I do not wish to marry him in the least.”

“And what princess ever gets to marry for love?” Eiko crossed her arms over her chest. ‘You have to learn to love them. Mum already told me I’ll wed a dashing man. Maybe tall, dark, and handsome, like Liam.’ Garnet and Freya exchanged exasperated, yet amused, looks before Eiko gasped sharply, tugging at Garnet’s elbow. “He’s coming this way, Dagger.”

Sure enough, Liam had spied Garnet and began making his way through the crowd. Garnet noticed his pink tie, exactly like her dress. It looked sorely misplaced with his crisp uniform. However, Garnet noticed many of the airship engineers also had mismatched ties. She felt incredibly fidgety in that moment and looked to Freya, as if she could provide a way out. But Liam walked quickly, confidently, with his shoulders drawn back. “Your Majesty,” He said with his deep velvety voice. ‘It’s great to see you again. Always a pleasure to see your sweet face.’ Eiko tilted her head down in near embarrassment, wondering if someone would ever say those words to her. Freya turned towards Sir Fratley. Garnet’s cheeks grew rosy despite her internal pleas to not react. “Hi Lady Eiko. Are you friends with Queen Garnet, too?”

“Yes, of course,” Eiko’s head snapped up and her headband was nearly flung from her stiff hair do. “Me and Dagger go way back!”

“Dagger?” Liam echoed, arching his eyebrows. Garnet glanced towards the window for a brief moment, wondering if there was a flag line she could sail away on. “Is that some kind of nickname? Seems a little harsh for a delicate person such as yourself.”

“Oh,” Garnet did her best to force a smile. “It’s an inside joke, right, Broadsword?” Eiko flashed her a set of sassy eyes.

Liam laughed. “You two are funny. Say, *Dagger*, do you have a moment to get a drink with me before we’re announced?”

Garnet gave Eiko a tense squeeze on the shoulder. “Of... of course. Sounds lovely.” And with that she strode forward to follow Liam across the room.

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When Zidane finished his last round of castle duty, he sighed as he clambered down the stairs to the grand foyer. He pulled his helmet from his head, his brown hair falling across his sweaty forehead. Even though being Garnet’s bodyguard was a difficult task in the sense of containing himself, being a soldier who just muddled around all day aimlessly felt worse. Garnet had only departed that afternoon and already he felt himself pining after her. He cursed himself under his breath. What a muck he had made. But still, he told himself this was best. Everyone seemed to be progressing. And still, a mental block came over him like a haze of

fog, a voice whispering in his head, that they didn't need him as much as he needed them. Still in the past weeks he had been a guard, he felt he had made no progress for himself. Zidane still reeled to ground himself, to find himself a sense of purpose. He didn't know who or what he wanted to be. Or who he needed to be. Zidane emerged from the castle into the dusk of evening. Lightning bugs were beginning to light up above the blossoming hedges. He was starting to take in a deep breath, when an awful retching noise reached his ears.

Zidane paused, furrowing his brow. Holding his helmet beneath his arms, he began to investigate the sound. Coming around the corner of a hedge, he found Beatrix collapsed on her knees, rubbing furiously at her face. "Beatrix, hey," Zidane rushed to her side, dropping his helmet and crouching beside her. "Are you alright? Are you light headed?"

Beatrix looked to him, somewhat relieved it was only Zidane. "I'm fine, I'm fine. I just... ate something bad, I suppose."

Zidane pressed a hand to her shoulder. "You don't have to lie to me, Beatrix. I know you're pregnant."

"That's absurd," Beatrix turned her head away. "A woman can be sick without being pregnant,

Zidane.”

Zidane pursed his lips. “Do you... want it?” He asked quietly. The two sat in silence for a few beats, only the chirping cicadas filling the void. Beatrix tilted her head down, staring at her knees.

“I don’t know,” Beatrix shook her head. ‘All I’ve ever known is ending lives. How could I possibly sustain one?’ She paused for a moment, looking to Zidane with a furrowed brow. “How did you find out, anyway? Did Steiner tell you?”

“Let’s just say I forced it out of him,” Zidane shrugged with a gentle smile. “Does Dagger know?”

“Of course not,” Beatrix stood now. Zidane scooped his helmet up. “There’s no reason for a fuss to be made about this.”

“Are you keeping it?” Zidane nodded towards her flat stomach.

“... Yes,” Beatrix finally said. “Steiner wants it, naturally. He always was the caring type. I have no worries about Steiner being a good father. I’m more concerned about myself.”

“Oh, come on,” Zidane shook his head. “You’re General Beatrix! You can do anything you put your

mind to.”

Beatrix lowered her eyes, uncertain of how to decipher the situation. For the past year, Beatrix hadn’t eaten well, hadn’t slept enough, and had mentally tormented herself with the idea of failing at anything. She had spent so many days, weeks, and months poring over maps and asking dozens of people the same questions over and over again. She had, in a way, become obsessed with the search of Zidane for the sake of ailing Queen Garnet. And yet, here they were together. He looked different, he acted different. And he had no idea how far she had traveled for him. Beatrix furrowed her brow, slowly looking to the knight. The pale moon was beginning to break over the mountain range.

“What about you? Feeling anymore like yourself?”

“Not really,” Zidane shrugged. “Every time I see Dagger I just... it’s easier to be Zeke than it is to be me sometimes.”

Beatrix gestured for him to follow her and they began to weave through the garden, towards her barrack. “I still don’t quite understand, Zidane. You see what Her Majesty is doing in your honor. Why would you leave her so broken hearted? Yourself

included. Don't you love her?" Beatrix opened the door to her living quarters and beckoned Zidane in. He seated himself at the small table rather stiffly as Beatrix worked at getting peppermint tea boiling. Zidane stared at the knots running through the grain of the table.

Of course he loved her, he wanted to say. But it felt so wrong. How could he convince himself he was any good for her? All he would do is drag her down, he was certain. Zidane didn't have what it took to be a king. He didn't know if he even wanted to entertain the idea. How would the people of Alexandria react? Zidane was a good for nothing peasant. An instrument of catastrophe. His insides tossed and turned as he weighed Beatrix's question. Beatrix cast a glance over her shoulder as she poured the hot water.

"You know what you're doing to yourself isn't any good?" Beatrix said, briefly looking out the window at the waning evening. She wondered how Steiner was holding up at the gala. "You're lying to yourself, Zidane." She set a tea cup and a bag of tea in front of the young soldier, who looked miserable beneath his dark bangs.

Slowly, he peered at her as she seated herself, dunking her tea bag into the steaming water. “Couldn’t you say the same thing about yourself, Beatrix?”

The General paused a moment, watching the dark tea diffuse. “I suppose we could all take our own advice.” She gazed across the table at him. “But you didn’t answer my question.”

Zidane crossed his arms over his chest, leaving his tea untouched. “It doesn’t matter. There’s loving someone and then there’s being wrong.”

“What is wrong about being in love with someone?” Beatrix furrowed her brow, lowering her tea cup from her lips. “I know it’s never easy to understand, but the heart wants what it wants, Zidane.”

“I’m no good for her.”

“Says who?”

“Says *me*,” Zidane shot back, sitting against the back of his chair, straight like an arrow. “Do you know how many times she was placed into a dangerous situation because of me? All the times I failed to protect her... all the times she cried and was hit and was bruised— I didn’t stop any of it. It’s



all I thought about when I was dreaming. It was just me watching her muck through the misery I stew everywhere I go. Now I know why it all happened. Now I understand why every city I visited went up in flames. I reap the destruction and the sorrow. And until I somehow magically stop doing that, I'll stay right here, under my helmet.”

Beatrix let out a sigh, shaking her head. Her lips were drawn back tightly as she took the time to have her tea. “You’re wrong, Zidane,” She said, simply.

“What?”

“None of that was you. If anything, you were the hardest working person on this planet trying to stop it,” Beatrix told him. “You may have found out where you really came from, but you were not someone else’s pawn. You were the opposing player, who placed it all under a checkmate. You may not be able to change your origin, but you, right now, Zidane, are in control of who you can really be.”

Zidane was quiet as he sat forward on his elbows now, dipping his tea bag into the water as a means to distract himself. His eyes slowly looked over his scuffed arm bracers in need of a desperate polish. He was in so deep. He might as well have buried his

head, too. He shifted in his seat. “How did you know you really loved Steiner?”

Beatrix was surprised by the question, arching her eyebrows. Beneath the table, she set her hand to her abdomen. “Well...” Beatrix looked out the window, spotting a flock of bats breaking across the purple and black sky. “After the destruction of Alexandria, when Steiner and I had fought with our backs against each other, and then separated... I kept thinking after that how desperate I was to see him. I felt this grand desire to protect him and keep him alive. That night of terror showed me that life is truly fleeting. People don’t just die on war grounds, Zidane. They can drop in a moments notice. And when we were together, I felt like we had a true reason to fight: for each other. And I suppose that’s what keeps my love for him alight. That we need each other and that’s okay.”

“You know...” Zidane lifted his eyes from his tea. “It’s kind of hard to imagine there will be a little Steiner running around here soon. Steiner’s got a big head, too. You prepared for that?”

Beatrix smiled crookedly. “I don’t even know what to prepare for. But... I do hope it’s like Steiner.”

Zidane laughed lightly. “I know you’ll be a good mom, Beatrix.”

“And I know *you* would be good for Her Majesty, Zidane,” Beatrix leaned in towards him. “I’m taking my own leap into the unknown. What about you?”

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The pint glass, empty and foamy, slammed against the table, followed by a belch. The true event was due to start any moment. Honored guests and nobles from all over the continent were gathered, chatting and having casual drinks at the numerous large round tables. Tantalus had their own table near the large decadent stairs where the more important people were to be announced. Beyond the windows, it was completely dark now and the large moon and stars glowed through the illuminated ballroom. Everyone was too preoccupied with the enthusiasm of the most awaited event of the year, however. The Tantalus table was cluttered in empty glasses of beer. But majority of them sat gathered in front of Blank. It had been a task convincing him to dress somewhat decently and come out to the gala. The open bar had been a good incentive suggested by Marcus. But now, they all watched him quietly as he finished his sixth beer and snapped his fingers at a

nearby waitress who had olive skin and long inky dark hair. “Two more.” He demanded, leaning back in his chair. The waitress was pensive as she walked away with the command.

“Sheesh, Blank, slow down,” Cinna said, shaking his head. “They haven’t even announced Dagger yet. You’ll be passed out long before that at this rate.”

“You’re the one who wanted me here,” Blank tilted his head back. A thick lock of his red hair crumpled against his temple. “So, here I am, just tryin’ to make it through the night.”

“But, sug, this is no way for Dagger to see you,” Ruby insisted from across the table. She had dressed in a saucy red cocktail dress, her ashen hair piled atop her head. Fake diamonds studded her ears, a prop she had swiped from her playhouse.

“Well, did you stop to think I didn’t want to see her?” Blank threw his hands up in a woozy fashion. From beside him, Baku eyed him tentatively. “She told me she was gonna make arrangements to go back out and look for Zidane. She won’t even write me back. She’s turned her back on Zidane just to be wooed by some hotshot engineer.”

“Sug, that ain’t fair,” Ruby clucked.

“Yeah, man, she’s the *Queen*,” Cinna shook his head. “You know how much she’s gotta do every day? She’s probably getting around to it.”

“Just be nice to her,” Marcus said with his elbow on the table. “She’s suffered, too.”

“I don’t wanna hear it,” Blank sighed. “You’re ruinin’ my buzz...”

From across the room, the dark haired waitress approached the bar where her tanned companion was serving drinks. She leaned up against the glossy dark chestnut counter, placing her hands flat to the surface. “Two more beers for table loser, please.” The bartender glanced towards the rather rag tag group of companions before setting about pouring the golden ale.

“Who comes to the most esteemed event of the year just to get so washed out?” The tanned girl crinkled her nose as she began filling the glasses. “Where’s Queen Garnet? Is everything going to plan, Astrid?”

“Yeah,” Astrid nodded, glancing around the room. Her dark hair framed her heart shaped face. “She’s about to be announced with Sir Liam

Winters. As soon as we set eyes on her bodyguard, we'll be set. Where's Felicia?"

"Over there, serving pastries," The bartender said, using her head to nod towards the pale girl working diligently at a table.

"Good," Astrid grinned as she was handed two foamy topped off beers. "Watch for my signal, Delta."

"Got it," She replied, gliding down the bar to serve an awaiting guest.

Just above the ballroom, Garnet found herself seated on a couch with Liam, glasses of sweet white wine in both their hands. He had been telling her all the nitty gritty details of being an engineer and discussed the problems with development of the *Blue Rose*. Garnet listened mindlessly, nodding her head. It was a welcome distraction. Finally, though, Liam paused, taking a sip of his wine. "I've been talking your ear off this whole time. What about you, Garnet? What are you interested in?"

"Oh," Garnet straightened her shoulders. "Well, I suppose you could say I'm very interested in local law. I deal with it practically every day."

“You know, I think what you do is amazing,” Liam grinned. “It’s an immense task to take on by yourself. Sometimes I worry about you.”

“You... you think about me?” Garnet asked, her heart pounding in her chest at the thought.

“Well, yeah,” Liam sheepishly rubbed the nape of his neck. “To be honest, Your Majesty... I’m quite smitten by you. You’re charming and smart and graceful. A guy could get used to a girl like you.”

Garnet’s face felt incredibly warm and she looked to her wine. “Thank you for the kind words, Liam,” She finally managed to say. “I think you’re quite lovely, as well.” Inside, however, Garnet was screaming. This was all wrong, she told herself. She had had her chance at love and she blew it. In the next moment, however, the group of honored guests were arranged to be announced. Garnet kept her eyes forward as she lined up beside Liam. As Hilda passed her, she gave her a quick squeeze on her arm. Garnet’s stomach rumbled and twisted as they began in their formation down the hall. She didn’t want to be here. She didn’t want to be doing this. Liam offered his elbow to her and Garnet was hesitant to link arms. It was if she was sealing her fate. This wasn’t how it was supposed to happen. A years

worth of anguish and torment washed over her as the absence of Zidane hit her full force again. He should have been the one appearing before all those noble guests, receiving thunderous applause for his valor.

“Don’t be nervous,” Liam’s hot breath fell against her neck and she nearly leapt. “I got you.”

*It’s not you who is supposed to be saying that to me...*

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The droning applause and hoots and hollers from the crowd seemed to never end as person after person was announced. The glamorous debutantes hung from the engineers arms like no more than a fluffy light pillow. Lady Hilda was smoldering as she came down the stairs with Regent Cid at her side. From the back of the room, Astrid poised herself, watching every extravagant person make their appearance. To everyone else, they saw luxury and desires. But all Astrid saw was vainness and disproportion. Steiner and Vivi appeared at the stairs and Cinna let out a loud whoop. *That’s him*, Astrid told herself, watching Steiner closely. As the duo made it to the base of the stairs, they showed



themselves to a long table designated for esteemed guests.

“And now, for the guests of honor tonight,” The announcer projected from the landing at the top of the stairs. “Queen Garnet til Alexandros XVII, escorted by Sir Liam Winters, head engineer of Lindblum Air Industry.” The applause was so loud, Astrid was certain the windows would shatter. Her dark eyes watched pensively as Garnet and a tall, dark, and handsome man appeared at the top of the stairs. Garnet looked like a balloon of delicate cotton candy, her long dark hair falling over her shoulders. Astrid ground her teeth together. Finally, after so much time, Astrid was finally in the same room as Queen Garnet. But not for long. Amongst the chaos of celebrating, Astrid lifted her hand, rotating it clockwise.

It only took a moment for red headed Felicia and slender dark skinned Delta to join her at her side. Together, the three waitresses let themselves out through the kitchen where the staff darted about like madmen, perfecting each and every dish with a cloth. With force, Astrid blazed through the next door, into the narrow corridor reserved for the help of the castle. As the girl’s walked, they slowly unbuttoned their red vests, undid their ties, and

removed their aprons, revealing their tunics and slacks beneath. They followed the determined Astrid, who walked with her shoulders straight, her chin tilted up. She had always been so in charge, just like her mother. Together, the three girls piled into the lift and Astrid flipped the switch over. Immediately, the elevator lurched and began dropping.

“You’re certain no one’s down there keeping an eye on all the airships?” Delta asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Of course,” Astrid said, watching the floors whiz by. “They’re all on the main floor. The lives up there are worth far more than the airships down here.”

“What will we do once we get to Alexandria?” Felicia looked to Astrid.

“Simple,” Astrid shrugged. “Join Squad Beatrix. They’ll never suspect a guard.”

“But when will you make your move?” Delta shook her head. “How long and elaborate does this plan have to be, Astrid?”

Astrid turned towards Delta. Behind her, the lights of the hallway flashed against the frame of her

voluminous dark hair. “This is the biggest thing we’ve ever done,” She said, seriously and stony. “This isn’t robbin’ some mom and pop store blind or getting away with petty crime. Everything is about to change for us once I get exactly where I want to be. I’ve been doing a lot of digging and snooping. I know what I’m doing. My mom would want me to do this.”

“We’re with you, Astrid,” Felicia nodded. “We’ll get you what you deserve.”

The lifted began to shudder as it came to a careening stop at a dimly lit, large industrious room. A fleet of airships sat before them, each of magnificent size and majestic formations. Slowly, the three young girls weaved through them, gawking at their elaborate designs. Delta scoffed, looking to an engraving of a mermaid. “Even Tantalus had a nice ship. Why didn’t Molly ever buy us one?”

Astrid pursed her lips. “We never made money like Tantalus. Scum. They just sing and dance themselves through a situation. They’re tacky and cowards.”

“Well,” Felicia said as she wandered by to check the next airship. “I hear they’re pretty much done

since one of their members disappeared off the face of the planet.”

“They didn’t even recognize me,” Astrid told them. “They’re drunken fools.”

“Here it is,” Felicia pointed, heading down an aisle. “The Alexandrian Airship.”

“Good,” Astrid placed her hands to her hips. “Let’s get to the cargo hold.”

# Chapter Eleven

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## Chapter Eleven

1798

*Astrid sighed as she realized the fraying end of yet another finger on her only pair of gloves. Winter was approaching rapidly. If she didn't find something valuable— and fast— she'd be freezing all season long. Pensively, the young thirteen year old girl stuffed her hands into the pockets of her bulky jacket, littered with patches. Her dark long hair beat against her back as she made her way through the bustling Lindblum. There wasn't much she could swipe in broad daylight. And her lock picking skills were dismal, by the declaration of her mother, Molly. She was hungry, too, and knew all that awaited her back at their lair was a watery soup of rather rotten cabbage. Astrid pursed her lips as she thought about her mother. She was a hard ass, that was for sure. She never gave Astrid any special treatment in their small mismatched family. If anything, Delta and Felicia received the most praise. But Astrid never let it bother her too much. She and her mother had a powerful secret, one Delta*

*and Felicia could never accomplish. Astrid's worn boots scuffed to the cobblestone as she paused to look at a booth serving meat on a stick. It looked so tender and moist. Astrid tugged her black knit hat, wondering for a moment how easy it'd be to snag one straight from the grill and make a run for it. She glanced down the long breezeway. Not many people would be in her path. She observed the vendor. He was a rather hefty man. How far would he possibly pursue the elusive and spry teenager? In the next moment, however, Astrid was startled from her thoughts as a town guard pressed by her, stepping up to order himself a kebab. Quickly, the young girl turned away, hurrying down the steps as if the thought alone was a crime.*

*Astrid turned sharply into a narrow alleyway to make the cut into the theater district. She came to a screeching halt, however, when she found a fourteen year old boy sitting on an orange crate, enjoying a kebab. Astrid knew him. The very thought of him irked her. He finally noticed her, turning his startling blue eyes on Astrid. He grinned, however, as if he was happy to see her. Astrid couldn't decide whether it was cheeky or genuine. Behind him, his tail brushed against the cool brick wall. His black coat*

*hung heavily on his broad shoulders. He raked his blond hair from the frame of his face.*

*“Hey, Astrid,” He said. “No lunch today?”*

*“Oh, can it, Zidane,” She crossed her arms over her chest.*

*“What? A pretty girl like you couldn’t bat her eyelashes for a free meal?” Zidane laughed. Astrid rolled her eyes, looking away from him with burning cheeks. “Really, if you just cut yourself some bangs in, you could totally pass as Princess Garnet.” Astrid paused, turning her head to look at him.*

*“You mean that?” Astrid asked, gazing up to him on his stack of crates. Zidane nodded, taking another bite from his kebab.*

*“Yeah, I’d say you’re pretty close,” Zidane grinned, reaching into his backpack. ‘Here,’ He offered a slender brown paper package. “I got two kebabs. Enjoy.”*

*Astrid pushed it away, walking a few paces down the alley. “I don’t need your handouts. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”*

*“If it’s money you need, why don’t you ever tag along with me and the guys?” Zidane asked, leaning*

*back against the wall and focusing on his kebab. He tapped the package against his knee.*

*“Mother says to stay away from you guys,” Astrid looked over her shoulder. “I’m not even supposed to be talking to you.”*

*Zidane let out a hearty laugh, tossing the stick onto the ground. He tucked the package into his backpack and hopped down, straightening his coat. “Oh, come on, what does Molly know? She’s only saying that because of something that happened between her and Baku twenty years ago.”*

*“My mother has always known what’s best for me,” Astrid crossed her arms over her chest, holding her chin up defiantly. Her mother often assumed the same pose when chastising the girls. Zidane almost found himself laughing again and he shook his head. “What?”*

*“You’re just another bum street kid like me,” Zidane told her. “We gotta stick together. Steal together. We could be rich.”*

*“Oh, and what would we steal?” Astrid tilted her head.*

*“Rich people just leave all their assets right on the table for you,” Zidane grinned. “This Saturday,*



*we're going after a rich man in the Estate District. He's got a room full of fine-tuned antique clocks. The collection is worth thousands of gil. You wanna come?"*

*"Again," Astrid arched her bold brows. "I don't want your handouts, Zidane."*

*"Fine, suit yourself," Zidane shrugged, tugging at his backpack straps. "You know where to find me."*

*"Oh, I'll never come looking for you!" Bossy Astrid called after him. But he only whistled a tune, not even casting her another look, as he left the alley.*

---

The cargo hold of the Alexandrian Airship was dark and turbulent. Astrid found herself sitting against the wall, her eyes cast down. In her hand, she held a thin gold chain. At the end dangled a small garnet. Astrid pursed her lips, looking to Felicia who sat across from her. "What you said earlier," Astrid's lips barely moved. Delta looked up from polishing her dagger. "About Tantalus falling apart... it was because Zidane left, wasn't it?" Delta

and Felicia exchanged looks. *Oh, poor stupid lovesick Astrid.*

“Yeah, they say he disappeared in the Outer Continent,” Felicia nodded slowly.

Astrid furrowed her brow, closing her hand along the small modest gem. “Do you think he’s really dead?”

“Who cares?” Delta shrugged. “Zidane was a hopeless fool.”

“I remember he was always trying to help me...” Astrid shook her head.

“Yeah, the blood in his body only flows one direction, Astrid,” Felicia said, nearly rolling her eyes.

“Seriously, forget about him,” Delta told her. “Molly may have died, but that doesn’t mean she won’t come from the grave and whoop your ass. Remember how much trouble you got in the first time she found you sneaking out with Zidane?”

Zidane and Astrid’s relationship was all a blur in her mind. It seemed like it happened so fast. Astrid had read the tabloids. She knew Zidane had been involved with Queen Garnet. What an odd twist in

events, she thought to herself, again dangling the garnet necklace from her slender fingers. Some days she wondered if her mother really had been right about Zidane. It seemed he had been destined for so much more than the damned street kids of Lindblum. She was certain she'd question it forever. However, she'd never get an unbiased answer.

"This isn't about Zidane," Felicia leaned forward, setting her elbows to her knees. "This is about Queen Garnet and true justice. Consider Zidane out of the picture forever, Astrid. He was just some dumb, lying boy from your past. You gave him what he wanted and then he went on a world tour with the princess. He should mean nothing to you."

Astrid again furrowed her brow, tilting her head. "He doesn't mean anything to me," She insisted. "But you can't tell me you don't get curious. We knew him. He lived right around the corner. Don't the stories in the newspaper sound so... interesting? Who would have thought...?"

"Yeah, well," Delta inspected her dagger before turning her eyes on Astrid. "Play stupid games, win stupid prizes."

"Besides," Felicia tilted her head against the cargo wall as the airship hit another patch of

turbulence. “The journalists do up all their stories, romanticize them. Zidane wasn’t really all that, Astrid.”

The dark haired girl was quiet as she inspected the necklace in her palm.

---

As the golden rays of the morning began to break over the mountain range, Garnet found herself in her private study. She sat at her desk, her chin in her palm. She held before her eyes a napkin that had rigid cursive written along it, along with drawings of arrows. Who knew a lead engineer would always carry ink and a quill? As Liam had said, inspiration struck at the most odd moments. He had drawn for Garnet the general structure of the engine for the *Blue Rose*, pointing out the small details of new machines they had innovated for more power and better efficiency. He had quite nice handwriting, she thought to herself. Slowly, Garnet’s dark eyes fell to the corner of the napkin.

*For a smart girl, who inspires me daily. No cloud, no squall, shall hinder us. Liam.*

Garnet closed her eyes and sighed, placing the napkin on the desk. Her insides tightened in her

belly. Liam had made the night somewhat easier for her. He was simple to chat to and he kept her mind occupied with interesting stories from the drawing board. Garnet learned Liam loved Treno for it's nightlife. He had even gotten a rare moonstone from the auction. He was well traveled across the Mist Continent. Garnet didn't share much of her worldly travels, however. Liam was bright and exuded confidence. Garnet had to admit he was quite charming and not hard on the eyes. But she would only break his heart, she was convinced. She couldn't possibly pursue a relationship with Liam when the entire night, she was wishing he was someone else entirely. And she had yet again managed to dodge a goodnight kiss. Garnet wanted the laid back boy. The one who exuded confidence, but not in an attempt to make good impressions. She wanted the boy who would make her laugh and whisper snark remarks all night. She wanted the boy who would propose the idea of ditching and instead, finding adventure beneath the stars. Garnet felt hot tears welling against the inside of her eyes.

*It's so unfair.*

Suddenly, the door opened and Garnet sat straight as an arrow, rubbing furiously at her wet eyes. She kept her eyes forward as she heard the doors close.

“Your Majesty, you’re back.” Zidane came to stand at the side of her desk. Garnet looked to him, but he tilted his head, his helmet falling across his face. ‘How was the gala?’ He asked, looking towards the napkin on the table. He recognized the engine of an airship. He also saw Liam’s name with a small heart doodled beside it. Zidane took in a deep breath to contain himself. Garnet quickly stood and crossed towards the waiting piles of letters demanding replies. “Are you alright?” Zidane furrowed his brow, again coming closer to Garnet. “Were you... crying?”

“The gala was just fine,” Garnet told him, her voice somewhat strained. “Thank you for asking, Zeke.” She approached the table and with a shaky hand, she grabbed a letter mindlessly off the top.

“Did something happen?” Zidane continued to prod.

“No, of course not,” Garnet said, looking over her shoulder. Her eyelashes were wet, her cheeks tear streaked. “I just...” Garnet sighed. “It’s nothing. We should probably get to work. Could you get the ink wells from the bookshelf?”

It took a few beats for Zidane to decide to fetch the ink. He cluttered a few crystal wells into his

palms, grabbing the quills, too. He brought it to the table, scattering them out in preparation for their day of dictation and signing. But he paused again, looking to Garnet. “Your Majesty, I don’t mean to be pushy, but we’re going to be here together all day. You might as well tell me what’s bothering you. I promise I won’t tell Rusty.”

Garnet’s eyes snapped to him in the next moment and Zidane ground his teeth together, cursing in his mind. “What... did you call him?”

“Wow, I’m really sorry, Your Majesty, that just rolled out,” Zidane explained, his cheeks becoming hot. “Weimar called him that in private and we all thought it was funny, but it’s not...”

In the next moment, Garnet burst into tears, pressing her hands to her rosy cheeks. Stunned, Zidane reached forward, gripping her shoulder. Garnet hadn’t sobbed so hard in quite some time. And never had she had such an emotional outburst in front of anyone. She was incredibly embarrassed. But that one mundane word opened some floodgate that she didn’t even know was budging. Zidane’s heart was utterly broken for Garnet. She seemed to be in so much pain. Instinctively, he wrapped his

arms around her. She turned her head against his shoulder.

“I loved him, Zeke,” She said in her broken voice. “I loved him and no one seems to understand that.”

Zidane closed his eyes. Was Beatrix right? How long was this sustainable? All Zidane was doing was playing right into his origin, being the reaper of his destruction. But still, he couldn’t do it. Even as Garnet’s tears trickled beneath his chest plate and into his shirt, Zidane couldn’t allow himself to take his helmet off. He wasn’t the same Zidane he once was. She would be horrified to see how far into the depths he had slipped. And she would probably be angry with him. There had to be something he could do to convince himself. But no ideas procured themselves.

Garnet’s sobs died away and she pulled from Zidane’s touch, rubbing at her cheeks. “I’m so sorry, Zeke. Truly... I... I suppose I’m just a little overwhelmed right now. That’s not your burden.”

Zidane’s heart was beating so rapidly, he was certain it was ringing out against his armor. “Captain Steiner told me to do whatever I needed to for you. That includes lending an ear.” He glanced towards



the table and shook his head. “Why don’t I get you some tea? And... maybe you can just talk to me about what’s going on. I won’t tell anyone. I promise.”

Garnet sighed and pressed her hands to the table. “I’m sorry but... you wouldn’t understand, Zeke.”

“Try me.”

Garnet again looked to him, her eyes searching him endlessly. She blinked after a moment and pursed her lips. “I fell in love with someone I was probably never supposed to meet.”

“And how did that happen?” Zidane asked, somewhat numb.

She furrowed her dark brow, tilting her head down. “It all happened when the thief and the princess crossed paths in this very castle...”

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When Zidane left that castle that evening, his mind was in a whirl. Barely two weeks since he’d woken up and he felt like he had caused a wake of destruction. What was he going to do? Beatrix and Steiner were right, as much as he hated to admit. But he would have to come clean to everyone about

what he did, who he was, and what he'd been doing. How could he justify going undercover as a Knight of Pluto? Zidane wasn't even entirely sure why he did it. Zidane took his helmet off as he waved through the garden and he sighed for the umpteenth time that day. Why didn't he have the guts to pull his helmet off in front of Garnet? He imagined she'd slap him, just as Beatrix did. And he would deserve it.

Zidane pushed the door open to the soldiers barracks feeling absolutely drained. However, he was confronted with an unusual sight. Weimar, Mullenkedheim, Blutzen, and Laudo were all dressed up in nice dinner coats and pressed slacks. They were laughing and joking with each other as Laudo fixed his short brown hair in a mirror. When the group spotted him, they all shouted in greeting, throwing their arms in the air. Weimar surged forward, roughly looping his arm around Zidane's shoulders.

"Zeke, just in time, my man!" Weimar grinned. "Sweet little Wendy from Squad Beatrix dropped a hint the girls were hittin' the bars tonight! Apparently to celebrate two new recruits. Me and the guys were gonna tag along and see if we can

assimilate. Come with us!” Weimar wiggled his eyebrows.

Zidane shrugged out of Weimar’s embrace, shaking his head. “That’s alright. I’ve had a very long day...”

“No, come on, Zeke, we aren’t taking no for an answer!” Weimar reached for his arm again. “You haven’t had the chance to go out onto the town with us before. It’s a blast. And besides, you’d be a good wingman, I can feel it.”

“Wendy’s too smart to sleep with you,” Laudo drawled from where he primped his appearance.

Weimar shot him a haughty look. “Please, Zeke?”

Zidane pursed his lips for a moment before he sighed. “Fine, alright. Give me ten minutes.”

---

Zidane recalled the few times he had partaken in Alexandria’s night life in his youth. When him and the other kids in the various hideouts of the theater district scraped together enough coins, they could afford the fare to Alexandria. The bars always had a charming atmosphere to them. They were far less dank than the bars they had in their nestled corner of

Lindblum beneath the iron skyscape. It had been nearly two years since he had done such a thing. It felt like an entirely different lifetime.

Zidane had opted for a short sleeve white cotton shirt with a brown leather vest left unbuttoned. He wore blue slacks, leaving his brown hair a disheveled mess, easily announcing his helmet hair. The guys beside him were amping themselves up. Zidane wondered if that's how obnoxious and carefree he used to be. Zidane's heart panged in his chest as he walked mindlessly beside his companions across the quiet plaza, heading towards the rowdy alleyways. He remembered him and Blank stumbling down these cobblestone streets, falling out of drunkenness, howling with laughter. *Blank...* What were his Tantalus buddies up to these days? He sure hoped they were still robbing nobles utterly blind.

“First stop, The Blind Fox!” Weimar declared, pointed towards the faded painted sign dangling from an iron rod. Zidane looked to it's familiar sign, his eyes intensely scanning it. He had been here before. Together, they all jaunted down the stairs into the basement bar. Immediately, Weimar hooted, waltzing up to a table. “Hey, ladies! Knights of Pluto in the house. Can we get the ferocious Squad Beatrix

a round of drinks?” Zidane detached from the group, choosing to seat himself at the end of the bar. Mullenkedheim came to join him, shrugging out of his plaid coat.

“That Weimar... I don’t know where he gets the courage,” Mullenkedheim grinned, his brown curls bouncing on his head. “Should have known he’d come here. This is where Squad Beatrix always goes for drinks.”

“So, all these girls are on Squad Beatrix?” Zidane asked, glancing around at the rather quiet bar.

“Yup,” Mullenkedheim nodded, signaling to the bartender. ‘You haven’t met any of them?’ He cocked an eyebrow up. Zidane shook his head as the bartender served them two foamy glasses of golden ale. “Well, over at that table, the blond girl, who looks the most annoyed with Weimar, that’s Wendy, General Beatrix’s second in command. Next to her, with the red hair, that’s Shira. And the other blond girl is Persephone. They’re pretty much the top dogs of Squad Beatrix.” Mullenkedheim tilted his head, taking a foamy sip.

“And the one’s here at the bar?” Zidane nodded his head.

“That’s Inez, Sophia, and Gracen,” Mullenkedheim rattled off. “Weimar said there were some new recruits, though...” He furrowed his brow, craning his neck around. Finally, he looked to the closest girl. “Hey, Inez. Where are your new recruits?”

The tan girl looked over her shoulder from having a conversation with her friends. “Back table. They’re not very chatty, so don’t get too excited.” And just like that, she went back to socializing. Zidane and Mullenkedheim both leaned in their stools to look into the furthest corner of the bar. Sure enough, a red headed girl and one with long, straight black hair sat together, quietly talking to each other. Zidane felt his heartbeat accelerate. He recognized those girls. Zidane straightened up, staring ahead where the bartender arranged liquor bottles on a shelf. It couldn’t be, he told himself. Why would they be in Alexandria? Zidane furrowed his brow, tilting his head down, as a rush of a memory came over him.

*It had just freshly rained on the streets of Alexandria. It was the dead of night and completely pitch. Not a single ray of milky moonlight pierced through the thick veil of storm clouds. Beneath the fading candlelight of the streets, the cobblestone glimmered with its wet surface. It was relatively quiet at that intersection where a shoe maker, a baker, and a blacksmith resided. It didn't last long, however, before two pairs of boots resounded against the ground. Zidane emerged from the dark alleyway. His hand was locked with his companion and he spun her outward. In between his pants, he was laughing, and so was she. Eventually, she crashed back into Zidane and the two staggered, still ferociously laughing, as Zidane fell against a nearby wall. Their giggles began to die down and only their shallow breathing could be heard. They looked into each others eyes and Zidane tenderly brushed his hand against her cheek, into her hair.*

*"I can't believe you got away with it for so long," Zidane laughed, holding her jaw in his palm.*

*"I really ought to work on my princess speech so I don't get caught next time," She said with dark eyes that glittered. "At least we got plenty to drink."*

*“You’re amazing, Astrid,” Zidane smiled. “I don’t care what Molly says, you’re the best thief in your entire crew.”*

*Astrid’s grin fell crooked and she reached for Zidane’s wrist. “My mother may seem hard to please, but that’s why I work so hard.”*

*Zidane shook his head. “You wouldn’t have to if you just joined us, Astrid. Come on, it would be great. Imagine us, doing all the greatest heists we could dream of. All you gotta do is remember a few lines.”*

*Astrid was quiet a few beats, studying Zidane’s face in the lemon glow of the candlelight. She enjoyed the warmth of his body emanating against hers. “This is already my greatest heist. This is my own rebellion towards my mother. I love her, but this is proof she can’t completely control me.”*

*Zidane grinned mischievously, bumping his forehead to Astrid’s. “Oh, so you’re just messing around with me to spite your mom, huh?” Astrid broke into a series of laughs as Zidane attacked her neck with kisses. She embraced him tightly. Around them, another light rain was beginning to come down, polishing the cobblestone all over again.*



*“Well, you’re still getting a good deal,” Astrid teased, their lips only inches apart. Zidane wrapped his arms around her waist. “You can pretend you’re dating the princess.”*

*“Oh, yeah, like anyone would believe that in a million years,” Zidane laughed before their lips crushed together. After a moment, Astrid tore away.*

*“I’m still thirsty,” She looked at him coyly as the rain drops fell through her sleek dark hair.*

*“Well, what’s open at one in the morning?” Zidane looked around through the growing fog.*

*“Oh, I know,” Astrid smiled, lacing her fingers through Zidane’s. “The Blind Fox!”*

---

*“Well, they look... feisty,” Mullenkedheim joked, elbowing Zidane in the arm. The young man perked up, rapidly blinking his eyes.*

*“Y... yeah,” Zidane muttered, keeping his eyes down and taking a swig of his beer. Why would Delta and Felicia ever join Squad Beatrix? What had happened in Lindblum to drive them out? And where was Astrid? Zidane felt his heart beat loudly in his ears. He hadn’t thought of Astrid in quite*

some time. Not since he had become preoccupied with learning *I Want to be Your Canary* for Regent Cid. That mission had become so large and so private, he had completely stopped seeing her. All thoughts of Astrid had melted away, especially after meeting Garnet. Their similar looks had made it easy for Zidane to forget his love escapade when he was carefree. But now, here she was again, in the forefront of his mind. Delta, Felicia, and Astrid had been inseparable. The three musketeers of petty crime. Had something happened to her?

In the next moment, however, his thoughts were chased away as hands came down on his shoulders. Zidane perked up, looking to see Shira and Wendy had come over with their beers in hand. A defeated Weimar, but not relenting one, joined them at the bar now, tearing Inez from her conversation as he ordered himself a whiskey. Shira grinned, giving Mullenkedheim a nudge. "So, is this him? The awe-inspiring, record-breaking, Zeke Tisdoll?"

"None other," Mullenkedheim lifted his glass in salutation.

"General Beatrix showed us your physical," Wendy looked to Zidane with a smile. "Someone finally faster than Weimar in a good way."

“Hey!” He bellowed from across the bar and the girls broke into a series of giggles.

“Nice to meet you,” Zidane held his hand out.

“Oh, and polite, too,” Wendy looked to Shira with arched eyebrows as she accepted the handshake. “General Beatrix never raves about anyone. You must be quite special, Zeke.”

“Nah,” Zidane shrugged, taking a sip of his beer. “My blood’s red like yours.”

“Modest, also!” Shira mused. She grinned and leaned over Zidane, signaling to the bartender. “This soldier’s next round is on me, Torrence!” Weimar looked incredibly jealous in the moment.

“Oh, I can’t stay late,” Zidane shook his head. “I have to be up early.”

“Yeah, Zeke here is Queen Garnet’s personal bodyguard,” Mullenkedheim grinned, giving him a pat on the back.

“Really now?” Wendy cocked an eyebrow up. “General Beatrix didn’t mention that, do tell, Zeke.”

“Not much to really say,” Zidane told them. “I just follow her around while she does her errands. She writes a lot and she reads a lot. That’s really it.”

“Hm, a Knight of Pluto who actually takes his job seriously,” Wendy pinched Mullenkedheim on the shoulder. “What a concept!”

The door to the bar opened and Wendy and Shira looked over their shoulders. Cautiously, Zidane tilted his head to look between them, seeing a cloaked girl had entered. Upon being greeted with the warmth of the bar, she pushed her hood back to settle on her thin shoulders. Zidane just about fell from his chair. It was Astrid. Her dark eyes looked towards the corner of the room and she pressed through the sparse crowd, seating herself with Delta and Felicia.

“Hm, the new girls have a friend,” Wendy placed her hand on her hip. “From first glance, I thought that was Her Majesty, here to reprimand Zeke for having fun.”

“Yeah, that is strange,” Mullenkedheim laughed as he downed the last of his beer. “She does bear a strong resemblance. I read something somewhere that said there’s at least one other person in the world who looks like you.”

Zidane kept his eyes trained intensely on the back of Astrid’s head as she and the girls whispered quietly together at their table. A terrible feeling was

blossoming in the pit of his stomach. Nothing about their presence seemed good. “Hey, Mullenkedheim,” Zidane placed a hand to his arm, trying to act natural. “Why don’t you take that free round Shira offered me? I’m... I gotta go home now.”

“Aw, so soon?” Shira furrowed her brow.

“Yeah...” Zidane said as he stood, his eyes back on Astrid. “I have to go.” And with that, he turned sharply, keeping his head down, as he bolted out the door.

---

Garnet stared intensely at the pale moon that beamed through her study’s windows. It was such a quiet and calm tonight. Unlike the turmoil that plagued her heart. Garnet sighed as she lowered her eyes back to the parchment in front of her. She had to take a deep breath to steady her hand as she dabbed her quill into the inkwell. Garnet closed her eyes for only a moment before she pressed the tip to the parchment, pursing her lips.

*Dear Blank...*

## Chapter Twelve

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### Chapter Twelve

The slanted daylight fell across the dark hideout of Tantalus. Blank didn't even look from where he perched on the window sill. The ruckus of Marcus and Cinna rang out from below as they scraped stools back and shifted bags across the table. Marcus began unloading the few meager groceries they had collected on their trip out while Cinna sorted through the mail that was in their box. Junk, junk, junk, Cinna told himself. They never got anything but junk. He paused, however, when he came across a letter addressed to Blank. In the top corner was the embossing of the Alexandrian crest. Slowly, he turned the envelope towards Marcus, who paused with a bag of apples in his hand. They looked to each other pensively before Cinna slowly craned his neck towards the tall windows, obscured behind old bell gears.

"Yo, Blank, there's a letter for you," Marcus called, sifting through the bag again.

"Don't you think that joke is a little played out?" Blank mumbled, his arms crossed over his chest.

Beyond the window, he watched as the woman in the alley took whacks at a carpet.

Cinna pursed his lips. “No, really, Blank. It’s a letter from Dagger.”

“Yeah, right...” Blank scoffed, shaking his head. “Like she even cares.”

Cinna sighed as he ripped the letter open. Slowly, he unfurled the parchment to reveal Garnet’s dainty and loopy cursive. “Dear Blank, my apologies it’s taken so long to write. My schedule can be rather unforgiving...” In the next moment, they heard the clatter of Blank’s boots and he slid down the ladder from the platform filled with beds. He snagged the letter from Cinna, who held his hands up and looked to Marcus with a rather exasperated facial expression. Blank furrowed his brow as he paced, looking over the letter.

*I have thought about your proposal over and over. You know I would like nothing more than to learn the truth about Zidane. I think, in a way, we all need a certain kind of closure. However, I cannot permit for you to go alone on your own search. The Outer Continent is dangerous, Blank, full of Griffins and Zagnols. I would never forgive myself if something happened to you. I ask that you please*

*grant me more time as I make arrangements for this task. Allow me the grace to find more soldiers who can aid us in this feat. Come the end of spring, there will be a thoughtful memorial being announced in the garden of my castle. It would be lovely if you came. And, I think, a very humble experience if you spoke at its unveiling. I know you are angry with me. I am angry at myself, too. They say the first forty-eight hours after a person goes missing are the most crucial. Unfortunately, that window of time was overlooked. I know I lost your brother out there. I lost a part of me, too. But I am hopeful that one day we will know what really happened of Zidane's fate. I am sorry, Blank. I am doing everything in my power. Please do not misplace my thoughts for carelessness or a passive attitude. I loved Zidane, too. But we have to think about ourselves, also. Thoughtfully yours, Garnet.*

Blank ground his teeth together as he slowly crumpled the parchment into a rigid ball. Cinna's shoulders drooped and Marcus crossed his arms over his chest as they exchanged another look at the sight. Blank tilted his head back, closing his eyes. Hot anger was washing over him, a persistent underminding rage that had possessed him for months. It felt like no one really cared. Blank considered,



briefly, that he was going crazy. But he felt catatonic. Was he the only person willing to test fate?

“I’m guessing bad news?” Cinna finally asked as the silence became prolonged.

“What do you think?” Blank didn’t even look to him as he fiercely grabbed the furnace grate, chucking the letter into the roaring fire. “She’s not sending a search out.”

“Blank,” Marcus grabbed his stiff shoulder. He didn’t even react as he watched the furnace. “It’s been a year, man. It’s time to accept he’s not coming back.”

“Like hell I’d believe that,” Blank shrugged him off, back pedaling. “How could you come to terms with that? He was sixteen, he had so much more to live for! His life had only just started.”

“I know it’s unfair... but, facts are facts, Blank,” Cinna shook his head. “Even if he did survive the collapse of the Iifa Tree, by this point he’d have starved to death or been too dehydrated to walk.”

“No!” Blank raised his voice, a headache waxing across his forehead. “Zidane’s alive, you guys! I know he is, I can feel it.”

“Blank, come on,” Cinna held his arms out at his side. “We’re worried about you! You don’t eat, you don’t sleep. Why are you punishing yourself? It’s not your fault!”

Blank’s dark eyes grew wet in the next moment, pronouncing the purple rings that framed the pair. He blinked rapidly, furrowing his brow. “The last time we saw him... he was on that... freakish airship, nose diving directly into a wave of dragons and a purple light...” Blank took in a deep uneven breath. “He was fearless. Someone with that kind of power doesn’t just die, you guys. He’s alive. I know he is. I was the closest to Zidane. We could have actually been brothers for all I’d known. But you have to believe me. I know Zidane is out there.”

“Well, how will you ever find him if you starve to death first?” Marcus shook his head.

Blank rubbed sorely at his eyes. He pursed his lips, looking towards the tall windows. “You’re right, Marcus.”

“I am?”

“Yeah, why am I wasting my time, waiting for someone else to take action?” Blank looked to him with his red, stinging eyes. “I don’t need the

Queen's permission. I never have. I'll just go myself. I'll figure it out."

"What? No, Blank," Cinna's eyebrows knitted together. "You can't just go out there! It's dangerous. You're not properly equipped. And you have no idea where you're going!"

"It doesn't matter," Blank brushed by him, clambering back up the ladder. "I'll figure it out. I'll walk the entire continent. I'll look harder than Beatrix ever said she did. I'll find him, I swear."

"Blank, we're not letting you go," Cinna called to him as Blank whipped his backpack out from under his bed, viciously cramming tunics and belts into it. 'You're not thinking straight. Whens the last time you slept?' Blank continued with his packing. "Blank! Listen to me! You're in no condition to just go barging out there. What good will it do if you get killed, too?"

Blank paused from his task, slowly lifting his head. "Well, then at least I won't have to live with this guilt."

"Just why are *you* guilty?" Marcus lifted his hands. "You didn't make Zidane do any of this!"

“Yeah, well, I didn’t stop him from leaving the band,” Blank shot back, snapping his rucksack shut. “I pretended it was some floozy chase. Just wanted a little peck on the cheek from Dagger. How could I not see how in over his head he was getting? I was supposed to be protect him like I always did on the streets.”

“Bro, we *all* let him walk out, but that doesn’t mean we sealed his death certificate,” Marcus told him. “How could you possibly have known what was going to happen? How could you predict that a war would ravage this entire planet?”

“We’re just talking in circles,” Cinna huffed, shaking his head. ‘Blank, really. Please, man. Put the backpack away. We... we got some stuff for lunch.’ He gestured towards the table. Blank’s neck was stiff as he glanced to it from where he perched on the platform. “We’ll think of something, I promise.”

“Your last idea was a depressing wake in some dank bar Zidane frequented,” Blank scoffed. ‘I don’t want any of your ideas.’ He leapt from the platform, his backpack beating against him. Marcus and Cinna both circled the table. “Get out of my way,” Blank looked to them both with his tired, glazed eyes. “If I

leave now, I can catch the last boat from the port of Burmecia.”

“The sight-seeing ferry?” Marcus furrowed his brow.

“I’ll steal a lifeboat from there,” Blank said.

“You’re crazy, you know that, right?” Cinna looked to him with arched eyebrows.

“Get out of my way. I’ll show you I’m right,” Blank raised his voice. With force, he shoved Marcus into the cupboard and stormed forward. Cinna reached to grab him and Blank also gave him a mighty push, causing him to windmill his arms.

“Blank! Blank!” Marcus shouted as the door slammed shut, rattling the walls. ‘Oh, dammit.’ Marcus darted towards the door and spilled out onto the warm cobblestone. He looked both ways. Blank had already disappeared. Slowly, Cinna emerged with a look of utter defeat. “This isn’t good, dude...”

“Dagger has to stop him,” Cinna said, walking towards the railing and gazing out over the massive city.

“How will we ever get word to her before Blank gets to port?” Marcus pursed his lips. Cinna was quiet for a few beats before he snapped his fingers.

“Marcus, go to the castle. There are scribes there authorized to use dart-ships to get word between nations faster,” Cinna explained. “As soon as you tell them it’s an urgent matter for Dagger, I’m sure they’ll send word at once.”

“You think they’ll listen to me?” Marcus shook his head.

“You have to try,” Cinna turned to him. “I’m gonna head for the west gate, see if he’s leaving on foot from there.”

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Zidane hadn’t slept well in the past two days since spying Delta, Felicia, and Astrid. He hadn’t seen them around the castle, either. Zidane was completely unsettled, however. That third morning was not unlike the last. He laid on his bed all through the night, staring at the ceiling. A darkness was gathering around his eyes as the first tweets from the birds began to ring out. Zidane sat up, raking his hands through his hair. It felt like everything was converging on him all at once. Two

entirely different lifetimes coming from opposite directions. Zidane's heart panged in his chest as he reached for his armor, shrugging into a shirt. Another day with Garnet, who seemed distracted and in another world. Something had happened at the party. Zidane wondered if Garnet realized she was in love with Liam. Seeing Astrid, however, sent him for a whirl. How had he completely buried the memories of her? For eleven months, they had somewhat of a formal relationship, filled with a competitive spirit. Astrid had been feisty and fun. And Zidane had enjoyed their escapades fueled by a desire to rebel. When he boarded that airship in January of 1800, he had no idea that he would ever forget about her. He had loved her... in a way. But not like he did Garnet. But why was she here? Zidane slowly pulled his helmet from the shelf before he pursed his lips and left his room.

The soldiers downstairs were already arranging breakfast of biscuits, jams and jellies, and bacon on the table. "Mornin', Zeke," Breireicht greeted, sliding a pitcher of milk onto the cluttered surface. Zidane barely gave him a glance, however, as he saw himself out. Haagen looked to the assistant captain before shrugging and claiming a biscuit. Zidane held his helmet tightly under his arm as he

made a blazing trail towards Steiner and Beatrix's quarters. The morning sky was soft and dewy as the world awoke for another day. Dragonflies already darted through the fragrant garden. It was warm, too. An indication summer was waning in. Zidane beat his hand to the door and waited impatiently. He heard shifting on the other side and then Steiner, unarmed, answered the door. Around his neck hung a blue gingham apron and his short cropped dark hair was rustled from sleep.

Steiner arched his dark eyebrows. "Zidane, what are you doing here? Is everything alright?"

"I need to talk to Beatrix."

"Are you feeling okay?" Steiner furrowed his brow. "You don't look well, Zidane."

Zidane sighed and tilted his head. "Where is Beatrix?"

"She's at the table, I'm making breakfast," Steiner stepped aside to allow Zidane in. "Do you want a plate?"

"No thanks," Zidane shook his head as he came around the corner into the narrow kitchen. He spotted Beatrix, already dressed for the day, having tea at the small table beneath the window. She



looked up when she heard the rattle of armor. Zidane set his helmet on the counter and came closer to her. “What do you know about your new recruits?”

“Hm?” Beatrix glanced to Steiner, who only shrugged from behind Zidane. ‘Delta and Felicia. Two girls who say they grew up as orphans in Lindblum. Not anything unusual for a soldier. Why?’ Zidane lowered his eyes. So he wasn’t going crazy. It really was them. “What’s wrong, Zidane?” Beatrix asked, setting her tea cup down.

“I... I know them,” Zidane said, glancing towards an iron skillet with sizzling bacon. Steiner squeezed into the kitchen and Zidane sat down across from Beatrix. “I grew up with them in Lindblum. They lived right around the corner from me. I guess you could say they were the female counterpart of Tantalus. They called themselves The Trixies.”

“So, they were thieves?” Beatrix arched her eyebrows. “That doesn’t give me a reason to distrust them. Look at you.”

Zidane pursed his lips and shook his head. “Beatrix, I have a bad feeling about them being around. They’re a team of three.”

“Well, only two enlisted.”

“I went out with Weimar the other night,” Zidane glanced to Steiner who listened attentively as he began plating Beatrix’s breakfast. “I saw Delta and Felicia at *The Blind Fox*. They were having a private conversation with the third member of their team. A girl named Astrid.”

Steiner served Beatrix her breakfast and she took her time snapping a crispy bacon strip in half before lifting her eyes to Zidane. “Have you been sleeping? What’s so suspicious about two girls meeting up with a childhood friend in a bar?”

Zidane placed his palms flat to the table, grounding his teeth together. “Beatrix, please, just take my word for it. My gut is telling me to be cautious. They’re up to something, I know it.”

Beatrix sighed, sitting back in her chair. She gazed across the table at the pale Zidane. His dark hair was unruly as it fell across his forehead. His eyes were surrounded with a darkened fatigue. Slowly, she licked her lips and she nodded. “Okay, Zidane. I’ll keep my eye out if that will make you feel better.”

“They shouldn’t be on any sort of castle duty,” Zidane warned her. “Keep them in the gardens.”

“... Alright,” Beatrix nodded. Zidane’s eyes hurriedly looked between Steiner and Beatrix before he stood, grabbing his helmet.

“Thank you,” Zidane said, heading towards the door. “I gotta go.” And with that, he let himself out. Steiner looked up from his pan of scrambled eggs, lamely staring at the door with a spatula in hand. He then looked to Beatrix, who quietly picked at her breakfast.

“He’s unwell, Steiner,” She said, tearing her bacon apart. ‘I think Zidane’s driving himself crazy. We can’t keep letting him do this.’ Beatrix raised her eyes. “I think we should tell Her Majesty.”

Steiner drew his lips together. “He’s in no condition. We have to make him see the truth.”

“What is the truth, Steiner?”

The Captain was quiet as he transferred his hot breakfast to a white porcelain plate. He looked to Beatrix, shaking his head. “I don’t know.”

It was another quiet day in the private study of the Queen. The silence was so utterly loud to Zidane; he was drowning in it. Garnet sat across the wide table, signing her name at the bottom of a letter. Once she gave it a final look over, she passed it to Zidane, who neatly folded it, packed it into an envelope, sealed it, and then finally embossed it. She had dozens more to construct and the next impending waves of letter were due any day. Zidane had no idea how she'd ever keep up. Garnet worked diligently and quietly. She barely raised her eyes to Zidane and when she did, she averted just as quickly. As she handed another letter over to Zidane, their fingers brushed and she paused, laying her quill down. Zidane worked on stuffing the envelope.

“Zeke...” Garnet’s soft voice broke through the silence.

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“I feel like I need to... clear the air,” She folded her hands on top of the table as Zidane lowered his task. “I am so embarrassed for what happened a few days ago. I put you in such an awkward position with my tears and I’m sorry. You’re a wonderful knight and you already go above and beyond all expectations. You should not have to contend with

my feelings. They have no business in government. I am very sorry.”

“There’s no reason to apologize,” Zidane shook his head as he pressed the envelope beneath the rigid crest. “You can’t be expected to hold it together all the time, Your Majesty.”

Garnet was quiet a moment as she inspected Zidane. “I’m really glad Steiner chose you to be my bodyguard, Zeke. You’re smart and well put together. It’s really nice doing all these mundane things when there’s someone pleasant sitting beside you.” Zidane grew warm in his armor. “Why don’t you remove your helmet and get some fresh air? I just realized I’ve never even seen your entire face.”

Zidane’s body jolted at the thought and he nearly crumpled the envelope in his hands. “No... it... it wouldn’t right,” Zidane shook his head.

“Oh, Steiner can’t fuss if I requested it,” Garnet waved her hand dismissively.

Zidane lowered his head for a moment. “I should keep it on. I... I was disfigured during the attack on Lindblum. I’m grotesque.” His voice felt incredibly strained.

“Zeke...” Garnet reached across the table, placing her hand over his. ‘That is nothing to be ashamed of. You were a victim, you’re not a monster. You were caught in the crossfires of matters that didn’t concern you. It’s unfair, but you are not grotesque. Please, take my word for it.’ Zidane’s heart thundered against his chest plate. “Life is short,” Garnet continued. Zidane’s body temperature kept climbing. “You shouldn’t spend it ashamed of yourself or hiding behind things. You have such little time on this planet, you should spend it embracing yourself. Be you and let others accept you for who you are.”

Zidane tilted his head up a bit. He realized Garnet’s face was very near to him. He hadn’t been that close in a while. Through his helmet, he still saw all the characteristic things about her. Those dark brown eyes, flecked with the smallest bit of green. The small scar she had above her left eyebrow that she claimed she didn’t remember receiving. That olive heart shaped face. Zidane pursed his lips. “Even if... I’ve done bad things? I can still be myself?”

“Everybody is redeemable,” Garnet grinned. “Look at you now. There’s nothing from your past

that would ever convince me you were an awful person.”

Zidane’s heart deflated in his chest. “I’m sorry, Your Majesty. I’m just not ready yet.”

In the next moment, the scene was interrupted as the study doors flew open. Garnet lifted from her chair immediately and Zidane looked over his shoulder. It was Liam, in a pilots uniform. His hair was windblown and he had a look of urgency. He held a letter up. “Your Majesty,” He panted, coming towards her.

“Liam?” Garnet furrowed her brow. ‘Why are you here? What’s... what’s going on?’ She paused only a beat. “Did something happen to Aunt Hilda? Uncle Cid?”

“No, no,” Liam shook his head, unfolding the letter. Slowly, Zidane rose to his feet. “A guy came to the airship docks, the ones we work at in the castle. It’s completely restricted access for anyone who’s not an engineer. We were having him removed when Regent Cid vouched for him, it was a guy named, uh...” Liam took in a deep breath. “Oh! Marcus, yes, Marcus. Regent Cid knew him. Marcus had an emergency letter to send to you and so I’ve

brought it.” He pushed the letter into Garnet’s hands. Zidane’s breathing had shallowed.

“What does it say?” Zidane asked, his own urgency washing over him.

Garnet lifted her wide eyes. “It says Blank’s run off to the Outer Continent to find Zidane.” She squeezed the parchment in her hands. “No, Blank! He’s probably already halfway to the Burmecian ports.”

“I’m in a new dart-ship,” Liam told her. “We could be there in half an hour at best if we push the engines. It’s still in testing but... I trust it.”

“Let’s go,” Garnet nodded without a moment of hesitation. Together, they began hurrying towards the door. Garnet paused, however, her purple skirt rushing around her slender legs. “Zeke, come on. I’ll need your help.” It took Zidane a moment to register before he followed her.

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The new innovation of Regent Cid, the dart-ship model, was narrow and compact. In the bridge, Liam, Zidane, and Garnet were nearly shoulder to shoulder. The engines were surprisingly quiet,



however, and the ship did indeed live up to its name. It was quite quick. Neither Garnet nor Zidane were expecting the take off to be so turbulent and forceful. Below was a small cargo holding, but Liam didn't have anything in it. As they soared through the sky, Zidane held his helmet down and looked out over the landscape. The mountains hadn't changed. Nor had the rolling green hills. In the distance, glittering in all its glory, was the industrious Lindblum. Zidane recalled his past life where he had grown up beneath the metal sky. He saw the darkened sky far in the east where the noble city of Treno glowed with exuberance. He saw the dark storm clouds of Burmecia. The ship tilted as Liam navigated them through the rigid mountain range, turning them towards the impending storm that lingered like a heavy coat.

What was Blank thinking, Zidane wondered to himself. How could he so incredibly reckless? The Outer Continent was dangerous. Going alone was never an option. Zidane's stomach constricted at the thought of Blank being wounded, or even worse, killed. And over him? Zidane couldn't live with that thought. In his youth, Blank and Zidane had stuck to each other like glue. As orphans and thieves, it was the only tactic to stay alive in the seedy underbelly

of the City of Industry. Blank had been the person he'd always gone to for advice. And the only person he'd let ridicule him for his dismal dating record. But now Blank needed advice and Tantalus sent for Garnet to do it for them. Liam kept the wheel steady, his eyes trained forward.

“Why would this Blank-fellow go to the Burmecian Ports from Lindblum?” The pilot wondered aloud. He seemed to draw Garnet from a long train of thought. “This is the one from your party, yes? The one who asked to speak with you in private? What’s his motive with all of this?”

Garnet tucked a dark lock of hair behind her ear. “I was very good friends with Blank’s brother, Zidane, before he...” Garnet tilted her head. “Disappeared. Blank’s not very accepting of the facts. I may be the only one who can talk him down.”

“He believes Zidane is still alive?” Liam glanced to Garnet, who only nodded. “Do you agree with him?”

Zidane cautiously peaked at Garnet, whose dark eyes scanned the sky. “I want to,” She finally said. “But people look at you like you’re crazy when you say that. When a person’s been gone for three-

hundred and ninety-two days, it starts to become painfully obvious. But Blank has suffered the most of all of us.”

“Well, I hope your friend realizes the sight-seeing ferry doesn’t actually make a stop on the Outer Continent,” Liam shrugged, tilting the wheel.

“Yes, I wonder what he’s planning.”

Zidane lowered his head for a moment, remembering all the risky plans Blank had devised in a moments notice when heists and thefts had gone wrong. Once, he cut a rope to a chandelier in a pub to get out of a blackjack deal. He had leapt off a roof and into a cart of hay just to escape the nobles in the high rises, watching him dart away with valuables. Blank wasn’t scared to test himself. Zidane pursed his lips. “The sight-seeing ferry has lifeboats,” He said, looking forward. “He’ll probably just steal one of those.”

“Hm... sounds risky,” Liam commented.

“When we get there, you two should just stay beside the ship,” Garnet told them. “I don’t want Blank to feel threatened.”

“What if he refuses you?” Zidane looked to her.

Garnet tilted her head. “You’ll make your first arrest on duty, I suppose.”

“Is Blank in trouble?” Zidane turned fully towards her now, cocking his head around Liam’s shoulders. “You really want me to arrest him? Isn’t he your friend?”

“Of course he is,” Garnet nodded. “It wouldn’t be a real arrest. But if I could just get him back to Alexandria safely, maybe I can negotiate with him in a more formal setting, once he’s calmed down. I’m hoping he’ll come willingly, but if not... would you sit in the cargo hold with him below?”

Zidane pursed his lips, glancing to the outer fringe of dark clouds. They were almost in Burmecia’s jurisdiction. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Thank you,” Garnet smiled, reaching across to give his hand a squeeze. His body warmed.

“The ship has spotted someone on the path, is that him?” Liam asked. Garnet was quick to dart onto the deck. The air was growing cooler as they rapidly approached the storm.

Hurriedly, Garnet emerged back into the ship with her windblown hair. “That’s him! Land up ahead!” Liam pulled a handle down from the ceiling

and the engine hissed. The rain hit them only moments later and a turbulence shook them all to their core. Slowly, they began to lose altitude. “Have you ever flown this ship in the rain?” Garnet asked, gripping the wooden window sill.

“To be honest,” Liam held the wheel that wanted to jerk in his hand. He pulled another level from beneath the console. ‘No. But worry not, Your Majesty. I will keep you safe.’ Zidane ran his tongue along the front of his teeth, looking the other way. The slanted rain pelted against the ship as it rocked and careened. They were losing speed rapidly. Liam pulled back on the wheel. “Please brace yourself. The ground could be mushy, the ship will shudder.” Liam pulled a chain and the ship rocked as the landing stilts expanded. “Steady, steady...” Liam muttered to himself. A moment passed and the ground whirled near them. Garnet’s stomach lurched inside of her.

The ship made contact with the flooded plains and it jolted aggressively. Garnet was tossed forward by great force and then thrown backwards. Zidane hit Liam’s elbow, tilting the ship, as he squeezed behind him, catching Garnet just before she fell to the ground. The dart-ship groaned in protest as finally it came to a stop, the engine sizzling behind

them. Garnet was breathing unsteadily as she clung to Zidane's chest piece. Her familiar body curved in his arms just the way it always had before. Liam pulled another chain, raking his hands through his hair, before he turned to see the scene of the knight who had deftly caught the Queen.

"Your Majesty, are you alright?" Liam reached for her, lifting Garnet from Zidane's arms.

"I'm fine, yes," Garnet pushed her hair from the frame of her face. "I suppose I didn't brace enough. Thank you, Zeke. I probably would have broken my head open."

"Well," Liam cupped Garnet's cheeks and she felt herself grow warm as he tilted her head. "We wouldn't want to lose any of that precious knowledge up there, would we?" Zidane ground his teeth together, trying not to scream.

The sound of hurried boots on wet gravel caught Zidane's attention and he stood, leaning his head out of the bridge. The rain thunked against his helmet, almost deafening him. Through the hazy fog, a jogging figure was beginning to appear. When he broke through, Zidane could have almost screamed again. It was Blank, who was running with a concerned face. He was looking towards the ship

and slowed as he came closer. Zidane watched as he approached, examining the steaming ship up and down.

“Are you guys alright?” Blank called to him. He nearly crumpled at the sound of his brother’s voice. Blank looked so tired. So much thinner. His red hair was a flattened, tangled mess on top of his head. His skin was so pale, as if the sun never reflected on him. “I saw you guys a few miles out, I thought you were gonna crash!”

“We’re fine,” Zidane told him, gripping the railing so tightly, he was sure he’d snap it in half.

In the next moment, Garnet appeared beside Zidane, uncaring of the rain coming down on her, soaking her to the bone. Blank opened his mouth for a beat before snapping it shut. He pursed his lips and tugged at his backpack straps before he simply kept walking. “Blank, wait!” Garnet called, scrambling down the ladder. Liam and Zidane followed, but as requested, they lingered near the ship. Zidane watched as the raindrops glided down Liam’s velvet pilots jacket. “Blank!” Garnet’s bangs stuck to her damp face as she reached for his arm. Blank harshly shrugged her off, however, backpedaling.

“I don’t want to hear it, Dagger,” He told her. “I’m going whether you like it or not. I can’t waste my life, sitting around, hoping you’ll make your mind up.”

“Blank,” Garnet shook her head, her face full of hurt. She panted as the cold storm came over them. “I just need more time! Please, let me help you.”

“I don’t want your help!” Blank shouted, holding his arms out at his side. “It’s OK if you don’t wanna care anymore, Dagger. He was *my* brother. But you have the audacity to show up with your new boyfriend to tell me to call it off?”

Garnet glanced over her shoulder, again shaking her head at Blank. She drooped her shoulders. “He’s not my boyfriend, Blank. He’s not... he’s just a friend. Did you get my letter?” She asked as a raindrop streaked down her face.

“Yeah, I did,” Blank’s red eyes met hers brazenly. “And that’s why I’m doin’ it, Dagger. Zidane’s alive. I know he is.”

“Blank, please,” Garnet inched towards him. “You know that I want to know the truth.”

“You want confirmation he’s dead!” Blank raised his voice. From a distance, Zidane looked on,



feeling helpless and selfish. “So then you can get on with your life.”

“That’s not true,” Garnet shot back. “You know I loved him.”

“I’m going,” Blank began stepping away. “I’ll overturn every rock. I’ll show you that General Beatrix didn’t look hard enough.”

“Please, my soldiers know valuable information and they can protect you,” Garnet shouted after him. Blank paused for a moment. “I do want to help, Blank, but there are channels I must take.”

“I don’t want your handouts,” Blank told her. “I know your heart isn’t in it, Dagger. Nobody even cares anymore.”

“I care!” Garnet insisted, pressing her hands to her chest. “Just give me time.”

Blank turned back towards her, shaking his head. “Time’s up, Dagger.”

Garnet pursed her lips together, her heart burning in her chest. She tilted her head down, the rain pounding against her like all her internal conflictions. She squared her shoulders after a moment, lifting her olive face into the slanted rain.

“Zeke!” She shouted. Blank furrowed his brow. It took a moment for Zidane to begin towards her side. Liam was right on his heels. ‘Blank, I’m sorry,’ Garnet’s salty tears easily blended into the steady rain. “I have to take you back to Alexandria. It’s for your own safety. Zeke, please escort Blank to the airship.”

As Zidane began towards Blank, as rigid as a robot, the young man shook his head profusely. “I’m not going! None of you believe me, but I know it! Zidane’s alive. I can feel it in my gut.”

“Come on,” Zidane said with a strained voice. “Let’s just go back to Alexandria for the time being. Trust Her Majesty. She’s right.”

“What do you know?” Blank sneered. “Who’s this, *Your Majesty*?”

“My personal bodyguard, Zeke,” Garnet said with a sappy, stony face. ‘And he’s quite skilled. Come back to Alexandria with me, Blank. Or we’ll be forced to do this the hard way.’ Blank held a pensive look with Garnet. Zidane’s body felt almost frozen. In the next moment, however, he began to turn away. “Zeke!” Garnet’s voice rang out and it was like a command Zidane could not ignore. He surged forward, grabbing Blank’s wrist. Blank

jerked away, but Zidane remained latched on. Together, they began dancing, sidestepping, with each other. But Zidane knew Blank all too well. As Blank's hand raced backwards in an attempt to stun Zidane, he caught it, twisting both of Blank's arms behind him, linking their arms at the elbows. Blank writhed and howled to be let go, but Zidane didn't let up. His heart wrenched in his chest as she staggered backwards, looking towards Garnet.

"He's contained, Your Majesty."

Garnet's shoulders rose and fell like the turmoil that stewed in her belly. "Liam, open the cargo door."

"What am I?! An animal to you?!" Blank yelled as he jerked in Zidane's arms.

"It's for your own good," Garnet said, her voice wavering.

"You don't know what's good for me!"

Zidane was slow to inch across the marshy plain as he held Blank tightly, dragging him towards the airship. Liam held the door open, ready to snap it shut as if a rabid animal was being contained. Garnet's face was tear streaked and she shook ferociously in the cold, splintering rain. Blank was

quite resistant. Tugging and pulling at Zidane's arms, unknowingly pulling at his own heart strings. They staggered into the low cargo hold and Zidane nodded, grounding his teeth together.

“Close the door.”

“Zeke, be careful!” Garnet cried as the door slammed shut.

Two low-burning candles hung on the walls, encasing them, otherwise, in near darkness. The moment the ringing of the latch rose, Blank let out a scream, hurling his head backwards. He nailed Zidane in the chain and he staggered, his helmet flying from his head. Zidane grabbed a support beam as his eyes spun. Behind them, the shudder of the engine came alive. Zidane lowered his head, holding his jaw that had received a gash. He blinked rapidly, however, when he realized his helmet was glinting in the edge of a pool of orange light from the candle. Slowly, Zidane lifted his head, turning rigidly to face Blank. The damp, red headed man was visibly shaking, his eyes a blistering red, already glossy, and his brow furrowed in total anguish.

“Is this some sort of joke?!” Blank hissed, coming closer. “You look exactly like Zidane. If you

were blond, I'd swear."

Zidane closed his eyes and pursed his lips. "It's me, Blank..."

"I don't believe you," Blank walked away in the next moment, holding his throbbing temple. "It's just in my mind. You're not really there. It's just like all the nightmares."

"Blank," Zidane surged forward, grabbing his tense arm. "It's me, Zidane. You sailed me around the world on the Blue Narciss, you were there for me when we faced all those dragons..." Zidane took a moment to catch his breath. "You looked at the end of the world with me."

Blank looked to him, his red eyes the size of saucers. "No... no, this isn't real!" Blank pulled away from him, staggering into the wall as the ship turned sharply, presumably to return to Alexandria. Blank cried openly now, looking to Zidane in utter terror. "This isn't possible. You can't be Zidane. Your name is Zeke!"

Zidane felt hot tears start welling up in his eyes, a shame drenching him from the inside out. "It's a fake name, Blank. Nobody knows I'm alive. Not even Dagger."

Blank held in a choked sob. “But... *why?*”

Zidane himself fell into the wall as the ship careened the other way. Zidane looked across the narrow cargo room at his crying brother. He could only mirror the same emotion. He had been selfish, he told himself. He really was the Angel of Death. An instrument of utter torture. He hurt himself, he hurt others. It was just what he did. “I don’t know...” Zidane finally said, barely above a whisper. He cast his eyes down, shaking his head. ‘I thought maybe to protect everyone I loved... from me.’ Zidane swallowed hard, looking to Blank with his wet eyes. “If you knew who I truly was, Blank... the whole reason I was even created.”

“You’re talking crazy,” Blank nearly lamented, turning his head against the wall. “Just like you do in all my nightmares.”

“Well, your nightmares are true,” Zidane told him, his voice nearly cracking. “I’m the Angel of Death, Blank. The true perfection of it. Kuja was only a reject.”

“None of that makes sense, Zidane,” Blank shook his head. “You’re as normal as anybody living on Gaia”

“Blank, I...” Zidane pursed his lips, his eyes throbbing. “I don’t even have parents. I never did. I was made in a test tube. I’m nothing but an experiment.”

Blank’s hot tears fell down his rosy cheeks. “But... you’re like my brother. How could you possibly not be human?”

“It’s a mysterious universe, Blank,” Zidane shook his head. “I’ve seen it from the beginning to the end...”

Blank rubbed at his eyes, trying to shake off the total madness he felt that gripped him. “Why are you doing this, though? Why would you just let everyone think you’re dead?”

Zidane pursed his lips. “Like I said, I don’t know what got me into this mess in the first place. I just... I don’t know, Blank. I don’t even know who the hell I am anymore. What I found out about myself, about my origin... I think the world’s a better place without me.”

“And what the hell do you know about the world today?” Blank nodded his head at him. Zidane was quiet. “Do you know how many people *miss* you?”

How long have you been Dagger's bodyguard anyway?"

"I don't know," Zidane shrugged. "Maybe a week and a half... two weeks at best."

"How could you do this?" Blank's voice was hot and angry. 'How could you keep this to yourself? You couldn't even tell me? You just let me suffer?' Zidane lowered his swollen eyes, drawing his lips together. Blank tilted his head. "Were you only thinking about Dagger? Are you just watching the tides, seeing if you still have a chance?"

"Blank..." Zidane closed his eyes. "It's more complicated than that. I... I just ended up in Alexandria. It's all just a blur for me."

"You chose her over me, just say it," Blank shook his head. "You'd have rather gone undercover to investigate some girl you like than lay low with me in Lindblum,"

"I didn't choose anyone!" Zidane raised his voice now, parting from the wall. The airship engine groaned in the background. "No one is supposed to know I'm alive, Blank. You have to keep this under wraps. I'm not ready to be forced to be me again. I don't know if I ever want to be me again. And I



definitely don't want to be King of anything. I could never be with Dagger, even if I wanted to. The only thing I can do now is be someone else, living someone else's fantasy."

Blank licked his chapped lips, almost pensively. "So, what, you're tellin' me I can't let Cinna or Marcus or even Boss know you're alive?"

"No one, Blank," Zidane shook his head. "I need to deal with some things on my own."

Blank sighed. "You're such an asshole... but at least I know it's really you now."

Zidane also sighed, holding his arm out. "I'm sorry, Blank. But how about one more dirty secret to bury between us for the time being?"

Blank was quiet a moment before he pushed himself from wall, locking forearms with Zidane. "It's a deal for now. But it's stupid, Zidane."

The young knight could only grin. "So I've heard..."

## Chapter Thirteen

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### Chapter Thirteen

Garnet was silent as her onyx hair fell against the frame of her face. Alexandria was approaching rapidly and Liam began tugging at chains and turning levers over. Beneath them, she didn't feel any vibrations from the hold. She wondered if her bodyguard was okay. It had grown so quiet. She wondered what scene awaited her once she landed. Surely nothing too gruesome, she reasoned. The soldier was quite capable and charismatic. He probably had already calmed Blank down. Nervously, Garnet tugged at a ring that accented her left hand. What was she going to do? Blank was angry in the chilling slanted rain just half an hour before. He was fed up, he wasn't taking no for an answer. Just as Garnet's heart couldn't rid herself of the heart wrenching loss of Zidane. But what could she do? She couldn't force Beatrix back onto another tiring journey. She couldn't expect Tantalus to put their necks on the line in another fruitless and aggravating attempt. Garnet closed her eyes as the wind whistled by. She would never stop caring, she convinced herself. She would never stop pining or

wishing for him. She would never stop curling up beneath the sheets, tormented by his absence. Garnet would never stop loving him. But no one knew that or understood that. She would never convince Blank.

Liam glanced towards her, his disheveled brown hair bobbing on his head. “Hey, are you alright?” He asked, turning his dark eyes back towards navigating into Alexandria. Languidly, other airships sailed past them with festive flags and dutifully ticking engines. Garnet blinked rapidly, glancing to the side of his face.

“I’m fine,” Garnet said, rather breathlessly. She pursed her lips as she looked over the red roofs of her kingdom. Home. It felt like anything but sometimes. “I just have a lot of business to tend to...”

Liam tugged a chain down from the slanted roof of the narrow cockpit. A burst of steam shot from the side of the dart-ship and they began to descend. He pursed his lips as he turned the wheel, glancing to Garnet. He thought for a beat more before he opened his lips. “I want to help you, Your Majesty.”

Garnet furrowed her bold brow, looking to him. Her stomach jolted despite the smooth decline the

ship was taking. “What do you mean?” She gripped a beam, focusing on the tall castle that was growing larger and larger in her sights. Garnet’s cheeks had flushed and her stomach tied itself into a knot. The brass bells of the kingdom rang out, sending a flock of cream colored doves scattering across the sky. Dark storm clouds lingered again on the horizon as the spring day began to wane. The gate of the airship dock creaked and groaned as it opened. Deftly, Liam navigated the narrow ship into the covered dock. Soldiers waved their arms as they directed him in. Liam quickly turned a lever and the dart ship released a puff of steam before the engines began to cut out. Around them, the soldiers leapt into action, securing the ship and pushing the boardwalk across the gap. Liam turned towards Garnet, who hugged herself now. Her dark blue button up rumped across her chest, flaring from her black skirt.

“You shouldn’t have to do everything alone, Garnet,” Liam told her, his dark eyes falling across her. Garnet felt her stomach flop beneath her porcelain skin. “I don’t build airships by myself. You shouldn’t have to run an entire kingdom alone. It’s not good for you. You’ll run yourself into a rut.”

“I’m fine,” Garnet shook her head. “I have plenty of help. Speaking of which, I should check on

Zeke.”

Liam pensively licked his lips as Garnet passed. After a moment of hesitation, he reached out and grabbed her elbow. “Garnet,” He shook his head. “You can’t always be this serious. You need someone. You keep everything bottled up. You’re always trying to be so calm and collected.”

Garnet glanced to his large hand that encompassed her thin arm. “I suppose you believe you are that person.”

Liam raked his hands through his hair, stepping closer to her. “Of course I believe that. Garnet, I think we were meant to be together. Not just because our families are intertwined. You’re brilliant and well-spoken. You challenge me. You’re everything I’ve ever wanted in a girl.”

Garnet could feel a shiver coming up her spine. She blinked rapidly to ward any unwanted salty tears away. She kept her voice low and even. “This is not the time to discuss such matters, Liam.”

He stared at her intensely for a moment. “Is this you’re way of telling me you’re not interested? Is there someone else?”

“Liam, no...” Garnet sighed, glancing towards the awaiting soldiers beyond the decadent railing. “This isn’t my way of saying anything. I just... I’m really busy, alright?”

Boldly, he brought his hands up to cup her cheeks. Garnet’s body temperature sky rocketed and her cheeks grew rosy as their faces came only inches apart. “Let me into your world, Garnet. I can handle whatever it is. I want to be there for you. I know Lady Hilda and my mum are meddlesome, but they aren’t what drives me to do this. I’m smitten by you, Garnet. I want to be with you.”

Garnet’s breathing shallowed and she reached up to grip his wrists. A bile was stinging the back of her throat. As she looked at him with her glossy eyes, she felt herself unable to give in. When she blinked, all she saw was Zidane. His blond hair clawing across his excited blue eyes. The way he sheepishly rubbed the nape of his neck. She saw all of his smiles, all his frowns, and even the few sparkling tears he shed. Garnet pulled away from Liam, utterly spooked. Her face was flushed now.

Nervously, Garnet smoothed her dark skirt, ridding her palms of their moisture. “Liam, I am

sorry. There's... there's a lot going on in my life right now. It's not fair to you."

"Garnet..."

"Another time," Garnet was breathless as she grabbed the ladder, descending towards the sliding haul door. Her heart was hammering in her chest as she drew her shoulders back and worked on composing her face. The steel handle was cold, nearly stinging her hand, as she swung it open. She wasn't sure what she would be greeted with, but she was certainly surprised. Her bold brow arched upwards as she found Blank and Zidane standing side by side. Blank didn't seem quite as rigid as when she had left him. Zidane adjusted his helmet on his head, reaching to grab Blank's elbow. Garnet folded her hands in front of her. "Blank, I'm sorry..."

"It's fine," Blank said, allowing for Zidane to guide him forward. They emerged into the high-vaulted dock and he took a moment to look around. Blank felt like he wasn't in his own body. It felt like the world made even less sense than before as he became aware of Zidane's hand gripping his arm. 'I'm sorry, too, Dagger.' Blank looked to her now. "Your bodyguard, Zeke... he's uh... he's really good

at calming people down.” Garnet looked towards Zidane, who tilted his head down rather bashfully. “I guess I just got a little worked up.”

“Passionate,” Zidane shrugged. Blank gave him a sheepish look.

“I’m glad you can see it from my prospective,” Garnet folded her hands together. “And again, I’m sorry, Blank... What will you do now? I’d be more than happy to host you here for a few days and discuss anything you desire. I want the same thing as you, Blank. I want to find Zidane, too. Perhaps I’m... scared of what we will find. But we can work towards a goal together.”

Blank pursed his lips and lowered his eyes. *If only she knew...* But Blank knew Zidane must have been serious if it meant keeping Garnet in the dark. He was different, just as he insisted. But Blank knew Zidane too well. Whenever Garnet’s name was mentioned, his eyes lit up like a lovesick puppy. But it was a different light than what enraptured him as a youth towards the feminine portion of society. Blank knew Zidane loved Garnet. But maybe there was more to it than Blank realized. *If only he knew...*

“Yeah,” Blank finally nodded. “I think I’ll stay in Alexandria for a few days if you don’t mind.”



“You’d be no burden at all,” Garnet told him. Liam was climbing down the ladder now, raking his hair from his face.

“I’m staying, too,” Liam said, straightening his pilots jacket. Blank immediately felt Zidane’s hand tighten around his arm.

“Why’s that?” Garnet asked, tilting her head. It made Liam smile. “Don’t you have work to do back in Lindblum?”

“If Blank is wanting to create a search party for your dear friend, I’d like to be part of that. I’ve been to every corner of the Mist Continent. Me and my ships are fully prepared to go even further if that’s what it takes,” Liam told her, pressing his hand to her shoulder blade. “I’ll send word to my mum and Regent Cid. They will understand. And perhaps while I’m here, Garnet, you can show me more of what is required to run an entire kingdom.”

Garnet pensively licked her lips. Blank watched her face intently. She nodded slowly, tucking a dark lock of hair behind her ear. “Zeke, will you show Blank to the guest room in the eastern wing? Liam, I will show you to your quarters. Zeke... you can take the rest of the afternoon off. We’ll reconvene

tomorrow morning. Thank you for your work today.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Zidane saluted, feeling Blank’s eyes nearly burning into the side of him. He watched stiffly as the Queen and her companion parted and left the dock together. After a moment, Zidane sighed, pulling his helmet from his head and whisking the brown hair from his face. ‘Come on, this way,’ Zidane gestured, showing Blank out the opposite direction. They passed through the tall, stony archway, brushing by busts and pedestals, and paintings that no one gave a second glance anymore. Nowadays, everyone was much too wrapped up in themselves. Zidane tensely held his helmet beneath his arm, marching forward. He looked to Blank, pressing his lips together. “What? Why are you staring at me like that?”

Blank shrugged, tilting his shoulders to squeeze past a set of butlers polishing silverware and trays. “I dunno, man. I still can’t help but think how stupid this all is.”

“Yeah, so I’ve been told,” Zidane said, directing them up the winding stairs.

“I mean, really, Zidane?” Blank shook his head. “You’re going to let that tool make a move on your

girl while you play make-believe?”

“There’s more to it than that,” Zidane told him, adjusting his helmet beneath his arm.

“Yeah? Well, explain it,” Blank nodded his head. The soldier took his brother towards a dark mahogany door nestled in the corner of the castle’s eastern wing. Blank’s eyes looked all around as he soaked in what his living accommodations would be. A poster bed with shimmering, silky, blue and gold sheets. Large windows that peered down onto the garden and soldier barracks. Creamy curtains that waved in the gentle summer breeze. There were decadent chairs with royal red brocade fabric lining the rich wood carved to look like ivy leaves and roses. A bookshelf of knick knacks and history, long forgotten by whoever designed the room. Blank kicked the door shut behind him, crossing his arms over his chest. Zidane let out an aggravated sigh as he let his helmet tumble into a fabric recliner sat in the corner by the windows. Zidane pushed the glass pane further out, gripping the sill.

“I don’t want to be the King, Blank.”

“Who said you had to be?” Blank held his arms out at his side.

“She’s a packaged deal,” Zidane turned towards him, the warm afternoon sun falling across his shoulders. It was still jarring to Blank seeing Zidane with such dark, ruffled short hair. “She can’t abandon the throne for some scum like me. No one would let her. I wouldn’t let her. But I have no right taking that throne, Blank.”

“So, what, you’re going to let Liam take that position?”

“I mean... he’d be better suited, wouldn’t he?” Zidane shrugged, pacing between the shimmering glass now. “He’s an engineer. What am I?”

“The right person for Dagger,” Blank insisted. “Dude, she doesn’t even like him. She *loves* you.”

Zidane crossed his arms over his chest, shaking his head. His heart thundered in his chest. “Maybe she just loves the idea of me.”

“Man, you really did change,” Blank collapsed into a chair, letting out a hefty sigh. “Never thought I’d see the day where I’d be trying to convince you to go after a girl who actually has feelings for you.”

“I’m in over my head, I get it...” Zidane seated himself on the chest that was perched at the foot of the bed. He crumpled over, digging his elbows into

his knees. His eyes scanned over his tired gloves and he ground his teeth together as he looked at the silver bracers on his forearms. "I don't even know what I want anymore, Blank."

Blank tilted his head back into the rays of light illuminating the room. His red hair glowed and his shoulders lifted in contemplation. "All I know is there's finally a girl whose good for you and it's like you don't even know what to do with it. For the first time ever, it's working out for you and you're throwing it right back to the universe! But you'll date some crazy girl like Astrid who will break your airship models just because you looked at someone else."

Zidane felt the blood rush to his ears. His skin paled significantly and he lifted his eyes to the glowing afternoon. "Astrid's here, Blank."

"What?" Blank furrowed his brow. "I haven't seen Astrid since Molly died. Figured she disappeared after Lindblum was flattened."

"Delta and Felicia... they're on Squad Beatrix," Zidane told him. "I saw the three of them at the pub the other day."

“But why?” The red headed man shook his head. “Why would they be here?”

Zidane shuffled his boots against the carpet, clasping his leather gloves together. He pursed his lips tightly, shaking his head. After a beat, Zidane lifted his eyes to look at his brother. “Same reason as me, I guess. They’re scoping the place out.”

“Why would they do that? Are you sure you didn’t mistake someone for them?”

“It was them, Blank, it’d be hard to mistake them, don’t you think?” Zidane shook his head and sighed heavily, looking out to the peaceful day that betrayed his inner qualms.

“And just why would they be here?” Blank tilted his head against the silky brocade, exhaustion washing over him from the whirlwind of a day that was finally dawning on him. “What suddenly would make them want to dedicate themselves to the Alexandrian throne?”

Zidane was quiet for a moment, listening to the birds carefree twittering beyond the window. He eventually shrugged, clapping his dusty, tired gloves together. “I don’t know, Blank. But whatever the reason... it gives me a really bad feeling.”

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The sky was transcending into a beautiful sherbet of oranges, yellows, pinks, and dark blues. It bled into Garnet's private study where she sat at her desk with a stiff back. Distantly, the dark storm clouds drew near. Her jaw rested in her hand, her elbow sat a top all the work she had yet to catch up with. Beneath her lost gaze sat the note from Liam, done up in its fancy cursive. *For a smart girl, who inspires me daily. No cloud, no squall, shall hinder us. Liam.* She felt her stomach clench and she sighed, pushing the parchment away, sweeping it up in the mess that reflected her own mind. Garnet sighed and closed her eyes, rubbing dully at her forehead. Her mind was in an absolutely whirlwind from the afternoon events. What stress she already felt was accentuated. She let out another hefty sigh, opening her eyes to gaze over the damning parchments that laid before her, unorganized and frazzled like her own mind. Garnet paused for a moment before reaching towards a few packaged envelopes, dutifully answered and sealed. Her fingers grazed the rigid edge of the paper and Garnet felt a shiver run down her spine.

*Zeke...* She pursed her lips. The elusive soldier who she felt she knew so well, but at the same time,

not at all. Garnet turned the envelope in her hands, her dark eyes following the contours of his crisp folding. He showed up so unexpectedly. And yet, Steiner saw enough light in him to appoint him to her side. There was something about Zeke. He made Garnet feel so at ease. Something about him carried a laid back nature that she deeply craved to have herself. It almost reminded her of Zidane, but she stopped herself, sighing, and laying the envelope down. Garnet shook her head, her dark locks framing her heart shaped face. What was it about Zeke that she found herself so drawn to? He felt like more than just a typical bodyguard. In a way, she saw him as a saving grace; a light that illuminated the typically dull, monotonous day that encompassed a longing queen. Garnet slowly licked her lips as she heard in the distance another low rumble of thunder. She lifted her head, watching as the array of pastels fading across the sky were slowly overtaken by the gray scale of a storm.

“It’s you and me tonight, Zidane,” Garnet whispered, looking towards the clock above the mantle signifying a quarter to eight. She wondered briefly what Zeke was doing with his evening off, but she quickly shook it away. He had been a victim in the wake of her delayed action. The fact he



couldn't show his face shook her to her core. What if she had acted faster? Garnet pressed a hand to her temple as the thundering storm clouds drew closer. Maybe Zeke's life would have turned out differently, she thought. Maybe hers as well. Perhaps they could have had their own happy ending; being who they truly were and being surrounded by those they truly wanted. Garnet closed her eyes again, feeling the hot, salty tears present themselves. If only she had acted faster, she thought to herself. Garnet cursed her timid nature, her naive self. She was blaming herself for everything in that moment. All the damage her friends took on, it was because of her, she was convinced. Burmecia covered in scaffolding, bordered by exhausted members of society. The dusty tears that fell from the eyes of citizens finding the flattened ruins of Cleyra, with no absolution as to what had happened. She was drowned in shame as she recalled the robust fans of Treno, listening to their remarks of hardship that by no means met the definition. Garnet lowered her head, her face pinched. Maybe everyone would have been better off without her. She wondered how she survived her own childhood. Was it truly fate that she washed up on the beach at the exact moment they needed her? Was there something else at play? After all she had been through, Garnet's faith was

wavering that she had a true purpose. To her, it was all unorganized like her mind. Fate couldn't be real, she reasoned. Soul mates were clandestine, she told herself. What would she know?

The door to the study swung open in the next moment and Garnet immediately perked at her desk on command. She blinked rapidly to erase her tears and came to her feet. When she looked over her shoulder, she was confronted with a scene of Liam holding flute glasses and a bottle of champagne. He had dressed more casually, in an olive tunic and slick black slacks that accentuated the slender nature of his body. He grinned as he entered the room, swaying in his step. Garnet's cheeks immediately warmed and she cursed herself yet again.

"Wh... what's this?" Garnet shook her head, gripping the back of her chair.

"I thought we should celebrate," Liam grinned as he set the clinging glasses down on a table. The cork popped and the champagne fizzled as he filled the glasses. He grabbed the foaming drinks, holding one out to Garnet. The storm clouds were gathering across the horizon now, darkening the study room windows. Liam grinned as he held the glass towards the pensive Garnet. "The dart-ship is a success,

Garnet. Piloting it through the rain, multiple trips of starting and stopping, the different landing trajectories... it was all a win. And it's thanks to you." He took a step closer to her, edging the foaming flute glass in her direction.

Garnet licked her lips, glancing towards the approaching storm clouds. Her insides weighed heavily on her, but she remained composed, just as she was taught, reaching out with her slender hand to hesitantly grasp her glass. Liam's smile only grew broader as she held the drink against her timid, slim body. "I didn't do anything."

"You did *everything*," Liam surged forward, gripping her arm tenderly. His pale complexion glowed as the storm traveled closer and closer, as if all of Garnet's internal conflicts and fears were manifesting into a shadow that was to swallow Gaia. 'You inspired me to think on a whole new level. You showed me that I could expand my prospectives, utilize all my skills and assets as an engineer. The dart-ship is revolutionary, Garnet. It can be made cheaper, making it more affordable to citizens. Think of how fast we could all move if everyone just had a dart-ship. And with your help, you've helped me realize all of it. This is a cheers... to you, Garnet.' He held his glass up. Garnet felt so numb.

In the next moment, however, the thunder overhead startled her. “Garnet... Garnet,” He said her name so softly. It made her heart pound in her chest. “You’re so worked up. I know today was stressful. Do you... want to talk about it?”

Garnet paced towards the window. The clouds were dark, stewing amongst each other. It would only be moments until the rain was released like all the tears she had cried and would continue to shed. She sighed, picking at the button on the cuff of her long sleeve shirt. “I’m afraid I don’t have much to say.”

“That’s why I’m here,” Liam came to stand beside her and she trained her eyes forward. “You don’t have to face this all alone, Garnet. I don’t want you to.”

Garnet pursed her lips, setting her flute glass down. “I’m sorry, but there are some things people cannot understand, Liam. I do appreciate you, I hope you know that. But... there are things I don’t want to talk about.”

Liam was slow to take a sip of his crisp champagne. “What was he like?” Garnet lifted her eyes to his. “This Zidane-guy. He must have been pretty fantastic to have all of you this worked up.”

“He was...” Garnet was slow to nod. “He impacted all of our lives for the better.”

“Did you love him?”

A bolt of lightning lit the sky up, illuminating Garnet’s olive complexion. She clasped her hands together. The question alone made her very fidgety. Slowly, she took in a shallow breath. “We all loved him in our ways.”

“And will he occupy your heart forever...?” Liam tilted his head, his dark ruffled hair falling across his forehead.

Garnet hugged herself and together they looked out the wall-length windows. The first few droplets of the summer storm began to streak down the glass panes. “I don’t know, Liam. I don’t even know what I want. Ever since everything has happened I just feel...” She took in a deep breath, swaying her shoulders. “I feel indifferent to everything. It’s like any processing power I had left is all gone. I don’t know how I manage get out of bed every day and face this entire kingdom head on. I feel so lost. Like my journey answered nothing. All it left was even more questions.”

“Like what?” Liam asked, watching the side of her distressed face.

Garnet shrugged, somewhat uselessly. “I don’t know why I’m truly here, Liam. I wasn’t supposed to be the Queen.”

“You’re letting it all to get your head,” Liam turned to her as a rumble of thunder rang out. He reached out to gently squeeze her shoulder. “You’re doubting yourself and it’s perfectly normal, given what you’ve gone through. But you’re meant to be the Queen, Garnet. There’d be no better pick than you.”

Garnet lowered her eyes for a moment. *There are some things people cannot understand...* After a moment, she nodded. Outside, the pace of the rain began to pick up. “It’s just hard, that’s all. But I appreciate your support, Liam. Truly.”

“Let’s have a drink, Garnet. Let’s unwind,” He smiled, holding his glass up again. ‘You, of all people, deserve a break. Let’s take one and cheers to the success of the dart-ship.’ Garnet looked towards her glass but she made no move to reach for it. “Garnet, please.” He leaned in closer to her. “Let’s just sit down and watch the storm roll in. We can

talk about whatever you'd like. I could never get tired of hearing you talk."

Garnet held her breath for a moment before she reached for her flute glass. She offered a soft smile. "Okay, Liam. We can chat for a bit."

"That's what I like to hear," His pearly smile returned. "I'd love to pick your brain, Your Majesty."

She could feel her heart droop.

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The barstools creaked as Zidane and Blank swung themselves towards the bar and were promptly served foamy, golden ale. Because of the steady downpour outside, *The Blind Fox* was not too busy. It was occupied by the typical soldiers. Zidane kept his eyes trained down as he drank his ale. Blank was busy looking around, inspecting each member of Squad Beatrix and the Knights of Pluto closely. He didn't recognize anyone on a first glance. Zidane allowed his dark hair to fall around the frame of his eyes and he heaved a sigh. It had been a day. As much as he hated working such a standard schedule, he truly did miss being around Garnet. His mind was all ruffled up as his thoughts surrounding her grace

and virtue. Even after all she'd been through and all he would continue to make her endure, she did everything with a lifted chin and an unshakable spirit. It made Zidane ooze from his heart. It made him feel sweaty. Blank was right and so was Beatrix and Steiner. This was stupid. What a mess he had made. But still, his bleeding internals chewed away at him and the voice in the back of his mind reminded him of all he'd amount to: pain, disillusion, and anxiety.

"Can I ask you something?" Blank asked, tilting his glass and watching the smooth foam gather together. Zidane blinked rapidly, returning to the moment. Blank pursed his lips. "Do you really want to be Zeke for the rest of your life? Is what you said on the airship true? That you're... a test tube baby?"

"... Yeah," Zidane nodded, placing his elbows to the bar. He took a moment to relish in his drink. "All those years I spent wondering what my mom and dad looked like... wondering if they loved each other or ever thought about me... it was all just a farce. I never had parents. I was just someone else's unnatural idea." Zidane took another swig. "Ever since it was all explained to me..." Zidane sighed, shaking his head. "I just... I feel like I never understood who I was again after that. I questioned



everything. And I'm having a really hard time getting rid of that mindset. Who am I supposed to be now?' He furrowed his brow and shrugged, lifting his eyes to Blank. "How could I ever pretend to be me again, after everything I've been through. I've hurt all my friends, I hurt my family... I hurt this world, Blank."

"That doesn't mean you give up and turn tail," Blank shook his head. "No matter what you've done or what you've endured, there will always be people who love you, Zidane. Whatever you found out about yourself, it doesn't change how I perceive you. Or how Dagger will think of you. We just want you back in our lives."

Behind them, a flash of lightning illuminated their backs. Zidane closed his eyes, letting out a hefty sigh. "I wish I could just flip a switch in me, Blank, and convince myself of that. But... I just can't. Dagger is a literal angel. I'm just some wound up mess. And Dagger doesn't deserve that... I don't even deserve her."

"You know that's not true," Blank tilted his head back as his belly grew warm from the beer. For as long as we've known each other, you've been one of the most unknown, invisible guys in this universe.

Now you have a Queen pining after you and you are just letting it all go. It's not like you, Zidane."

Zidane sighed, but still a rare grin came to his face. "Yeah, well... I walked along the fire and I got burned. Surprise, surprise, huh?"

"I think Dagger would you accept you, no matter what kind of person you think you are."

"Too bad this isn't one of Lord Avon's love stories, huh?" Zidane looked to Blank. In the next moment, however, he saw a cloaked figure moving behind him. Zidane furrowed his brow as Blank glanced over his shoulders. The slender figure grabbed a chair and scraped it back before standing on it. By now, the few curious bar dwellers cast their eyes as the stranger lifted their hood back. Zidane's heart nearly plummeted to his feet.

"Dude," Blank's eyes had grown wide as he glanced to Zidane. "It's Astrid."

Zidane was quiet as his gripped tightened around his glass. He watched as she brushed her dark, long hair from the frame of her olive face. She took the time to scan the room and that's when she and Zidane made eye contact. They held it tensely. A surprised look began to grow across her smooth skin

but she composed her face. The eye contact waned on for a few more beats and they silently began to remember all the moments they shared. But it dissipated as Astrid looked back towards the bar occupants.

“My friends,” She spoke in her clear voice. It shook Zidane to his inner core. His past life had nearly been completely shrouded for him in the past year of events. But hearing her voice unraveled something within him, making him regret many things. “I have much to tell you from inside sources. Queen Garnet doesn’t have all of us in mind...”

From the bar, Zidane bit down on his lip so hard, he tasted copper.

# Chapter Fourteen

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## Chapter Fourteen

1799

*The snow fell silently, caking against the large glass pane that sported a crack resembling a dainty spiderweb. Zidane was quiet, his arms wrapped around his knees. His black woolen coat fell heavily on his shoulders as he lost himself in his mind. Lindblum was a winter wonderland. In his youth, Zidane had always been so mesmerized by the soft snow that gathered in his hair and the flakes that were caught in his eyelashes. But he pursed his lips and let out a sigh, doing his best to unwind. Every day had been the same thing for the past two weeks. Tantalus had a task, a job, that came directly from the top. The trainings were intense and the memorization was tiring. Zidane picked at the glimmering black button on his cuff.*

*“You gotta know when to call it quits, boy,” Baku’s voice echoed in his head. “You’ve always been too good for a girl like that. She’s trouble. More so than what she’s worth.”*

*Zidane sighed, his breath puffing before him. He hugged his jacket against himself, gazing around the large room, illuminated only by the slanted orange flames of candles. The Trixie's hideout was nothing compared to Tantalus'. Cracking windows, doors that didn't shift into the threshold right. Not even a fireplace or furnace to make the winters bearable. Their furniture was sparse and bland in color. Not that Tantalus was anything like a homely inn. He rubbed his hands together, glancing towards the crooked kitchen door. He could see the shadows of figures on the other side and he pursed his lips, turning his eyes back towards the dark sky, fluttering with a chill and dozens of snowflakes.*

*"She's different, Boss," He heard himself say and he furrowed his brow, resting his chin to his knees. "Astrid has more talent than all of them. Without Astrid, The Trixie's are nothing. That's why we should have her join us. She's great at deceiving people. She'd be perfect for this heist, don't you think?" Zidane slowly licked his lips, focusing on the growing pile of snow banks that were beginning to completely cover the familiar brick paths of Lindblum.*

*"No, boy," Baku's rigid voice rang out. "I don't think she's anything but trouble. Keep your head on*

*straight.”*

*The kitchen door creaked open and Zidane sat up, raking his hair from his face. Astrid emerged, her boots thudding against the tilted foundation of the decaying building. Her onyx hair was braided and resting on her shoulder. She was wrapped up in a creamy cashmere sweater and a red peacoat that flared from her slender body. In her gloved hands, she carried a tray of mugs, steaming from the hot coffee she had spent the time making. She smiled as she approached Zidane and he shivered in his coat as he looked over her familiar face. The faint scene of her perfume that reminded him of the flowers in the plains of Dali reached his nose.*

*“You’re lettin’ the blood go the wrong way!” Baku’s voice startled him yet again.*

*Gracefully, Astrid pulled herself onto the large bay window seat beside Zidane, carefully sliding the mugs of coffee between them. Astrid took a moment to look at the still and silent scene beyond her window before she grabbed her own mug. A hairline crack ran the length of the handle. The rim was cracked and jagged. Astrid was cautious of it, however, as she curled up across from Zidane, pressing her back to the chilly glass. Not a single*

soul wandered the streets. The first snow of the year had come on aggressively. No doubt everyone would be shoveling themselves out in the morning. Astrid watched Zidane carefully over the top of her mug as she tilted her head back, desperate to fill her body with something warm. Zidane had been kind enough to bring a hot batch of potato stew over that evening. She thought she would have been going to bed with an empty stomach. But, as usual, Zidane managed to make things happen. He kept his eyes directed out the windows. A silky mist, sparkling from the snow, was beginning to form. Zidane was quiet, hunched within the confines of his dashing gray woolen coat. Astrid admired him quite frequently. She couldn't help but think how wonderful he was, so perfect. In a way, that scared her. Just as it did in that moment.

“You’ve been quiet all evening,” Astrid said in her smooth and calculating voice. “Is something bothering you? You seem like you’re in another world.”

Zidane again pushed the hair from his face and heaved a sigh, sinking against the wall and holding his mug. “There’s just a lot going on at home right now.”

*“I’ve always told you...” Astrid stuck her boot out, giving him a nudge against his leg. ‘He’s way harder on you than Mother is on me.’ She paused, however, furrowing her brow, when she realized that Zidane hadn’t smiled or made any movement with his face. Astrid gripped her mug tightly, giving him a mightier nudge with her boot. “What’s wrong? Are things really that bad at home? What’s Baku got up his sleeve this time?”*

*Zidane shook his head, looking to her through the steam rising from his mug. Astrid felt her heart jolt in her chest as those stunning cerulean blue eyes fell across her. She had never seen him so serious or solemn. She didn’t know what had changed or what could have happened. She sat forward now, nervously picking at the cuff of her over sized sweater sleeves. Zidane looked back towards the window knowing that with the approaching new year, he’d be on the grandest heist of his life. One that he knew would be exhilarating. And yet, it was not something he could share with Astrid, despite sharing the past year of his life with her. His insides curled, forming a noose around his own skeletal system. He could hear his brother’s voices echoing around in his mind. All the flak he had received for dating someone as needy and annoying as Astrid*



*had never worn him thin. His brother's were unable to unnerve him or make him see Astrid in any derogatory way. The past year with Astrid, spent binge drinking, cheating at all the street games, and even card games, had been wonderful. For once, there was a girl he enjoyed bounding down damp alleys with, sharing stolen snacks, and cracking up over the ridiculousness of parents. They had had a lot of fun and Zidane clung to it in that moment, his eyes drifting down with the snowflakes.*

*"We've been hired," Zidane finally said, keeping his eyes trained out the window. "Come January, we'll be gone from Lindblum for a few days... but..." Zidane shifted on the sill, intertwining his legs between hers. "I don't know what's going to happen after the job is finished."*

*"What do you mean?" Astrid shook her head. "You're talking in riddles, Zidane."*

*"I wish I could say more, but I can't," Zidane told her. "There's something we have to do. But I don't know what the consequences will be."*

*"You? Scared of consequences?" She let out a laugh that quickly tapered off as Zidane remained still and stoic. Astrid paused for a moment, gingerly tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. 'Zidane,' She*

*leaned forward, pressing her hand to his thigh. Her brow knitted tightly together now and she pursed her lips. "What the hell is going on? Why are you acting so weird?"*

*"Astrid..." Zidane sat forward, taking her gloved hand into his. Gently, his finger ran between the grooves of her knuckles. She watched him intensely with dark, glossy eyes. "I'm not going to be able to see you for a while. After this job is done, I'm expecting us to be in hiding for quite some time. And the less you know, the better. I don't know how long I'll be gone but... I'm sorry. I think... this is the end."*

*Salty tears now clouded the brim of her eyes and she shook her head, rigidly, like a robot. "What?" She whispered, her voice somewhat strained. "Zidane, what the hell are you talking about? You've said it yourself in the past, we can't take our jobs that seriously. You're all I have."*

*"I'm sorry," Zidane said again. "Sometimes we do have to take our jobs seriously."*

*"Just like that?" Astrid was beginning to shake. "You're just going to leave me? All for what, Zidane? Some dumb golden coins and bragging rights?"*

*“It’s more than that,” Zidane sighed, cradling his mug in his hands again. He found it difficult to look at Astrid. He hated seeing the tears streaking down her olive complexion. “Astrid, this is the most serious job I’ve ever had. Tantalus, the whole crew, other people... they’re all counting on me that it goes right.”*

*Astrid leaned forward, pressing her hands to the sill between them. “Just tell me where you’re going, Zidane. Tell me what you’re doing.”*

*“I can’t,” Zidane replied quickly.*

*Astrid shook her head, falling roughly against the cold window, letting out a huff. “Seems awfully convenient, don’t you think? We’re finally getting somewhere and then you just turn around and bail on me.” Astrid crossed her arms over her chest, pursing her lips. “Just like Delta said you’d do.”*

*“That’s not what this is about, Astrid,” Zidane told her. “This job is dangerous. It might have unexpected outcomes. I could be hanged for what we’re trying to do.”*

*Astrid was quiet for a moment, staring at him with a wet and stony face. “Who hired you?”*

*“You can’t know anything, I’m sorry. It’s for your safety.”*

*“Bullshit!” Astrid raised her voice now. “That’s such a crock of Chocobo shit, Zidane. When have you ever cared about my safety?”*

*“This is different,” Zidane was stern. “I’ve always cared about your well-being, Astrid. If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have tried to convince you to leave The Trixies and join Tantalus. These people here, **they** don’t care about you at all. Your mom treats you like shit—”*

*“-Your dad **beats** you—”*

*“Yeah, well, you’re going nowhere just as fast as me,” Zidane’s blue eyes pierced hers. “But all I know is that this is important and you can either understand that or—”*

*“Or what?” Astrid pushed her lips together tightly. “What, do you think I should wait for you or something?”*

*“That’s your decision to make, Astrid. For once in your life, you should make a choice for yourself and stop relying on your mom or your sister’s to tell you what to do.”*

*Astrid stood up now, her breath steaming behind her in the frigid room. She was so angry, she wanted to break something. But she remained in control. She paced a few steps before a chuckle erupted that made her shoulders bounce. She turned back to Zidane, her thick plait beating against her back. “You talk so down on my family but they were right about you and the rest of Tantalus. All of you are always looking for the easy way out. You suck up in the worst ways imaginable to get what you want. You don’t care who you step on! You never genuinely liked me. You wanted what every other guy lusts after and once you finally got it, you come up with this bullshit excuse. When has Tantalus ever been so important that your work is this secretive?!”*

*Zidane sighed and began buttoning his coat, coming to his feet. “Believe whatever you want, Astrid. Maybe one day you’ll understand. Something on the horizon will put everything into perspective for you.”*

*Astrid crossed her arms over her chest. “I’ll believe it when I see it in the tabloids.”*

*They held a tense eye contact before Zidane went for the door. The howling wind could be heard as he stepped into the threshold. He cast one more glance*

*at her before shutting the door. Astrid's hands curled into fists and she looked towards the wintry storm outside with hot tears that blurred her vision. Her emotions stirred and sizzled inside of her. Her heart felt as if it had been smashed into a thousand pieces. She cursed Zidane in her mind, but after a few moments, the throbbing, rushing blood in her ears began to subside. She let out an uneven sigh, collapsing against the sill. Her eyes fell over Zidane's untouched mug, still steaming with the hopeful desire to be wanted. Astrid pressed her wet eyes to the nook of her elbow. What he said couldn't be real, she told herself. Zidane could never be that serious about anything in his life, she reasoned.*

*But little did she know, it'd be the last time she'd see those dreamy blue eyes for months and years to come And the tabloids would never tell her what she wanted to believe.*

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*Zidane awoke covered in sweat, a sharp gasp rising up from within him. The rainy gray scale of the morning came across as a slanted shadow in his narrow living quarters. Zidane struggled to catch his breath as he pressed a hand to his sticky forehead. Queen Garnet wishes to keep you in the shadows.*

*The less you know, the easier you are to persuade.* Zidane's heart hammered in his chest as he untangled himself from his sheets and pressed his elbows to his knees. *Queen Garnet keeps secrets. Why would she care to be entirely truthful if she can get away with deceiving you? She doesn't care about the public no matter how much she appears in it. All she cares about is her pretty face and keeping you on the dark side of the fence.* Zidane rubbed sorely at his hot and tired face, heaving a sigh in the process. He fell back against the wall, watching as the rain pelted down against the small window. Last night's events raced through his mind. The blood in his veins grew warm. What was Astrid up to? How many times had she given a speech like that? She seemed far too composed and calm. It led him to believe it wasn't her first time and certainly not her last time. *Queen Garnet lets you in to distract you from the fact she doesn't let you see everything. She is the servant of the people but her kind words and deceitful listening face makes you believe it's truly the other way around.* Zidane furrowed his brow. What would make her do this? What was she after?

Zidane dressed quickly, realizing he had to meet Garnet in the next hour. Again, he blazed out of his room with his helmet tucked dutifully beneath his

arm. He stormed right past the breakfast table again, ignoring the mornings greetings and offer of hot coffee from the pot. The soldiers looked to each other with shrugs. Zidane's eyes were only set forward as he began his bobbing march towards Beatrix and Steiner's quarters. His insides were burning, it felt like. He felt so incredibly wound up, his thoughts discombobulated and always shifting in his mind. He had nothing prepared, he realized, as he navigated the tall hedges. All he could rely on was his moral compass telling him everything was wrong. *He* was wrong.

“Good morning, Zidane.”

He stopped dead in his tracks, frozen. Zidane's heart beat thunderously in his chest as he stiffly turned, seeing the iron clad Delta and Felicia. They hadn't changed at all. Delta still sported her thick braids that framed her tanned face. Felicia still had the fire red hair, accentuating her spunky attitude. Zidane pursed his lips together tensely. It was almost like a flood of *deja vu*. How many times had he come face to face with these snarky girls? They had never liked him, though he wasn't sure where the resentment spread from. Most likely their hen mother, Molly, who had had a lover's spat with Baku in her own youth, far before their days. During



his eleven month relationship with Astrid, things had only become worse, quite the opposite of what he pictured happening. Zidane was just never good enough for The Trixies. Zidane took in a shallow breath, shifting in his boots.

“Delta... Felicia,” He said stiffly, nodding at them. “Surprised to see you in uniform.”

“We were gonna say the same thing,” Felicia smiled, her green eyes glowing in the dewy morning light. “You? A soldier? And the queen’s bodyguard at that.”

“What are you doing here?” Zidane asked.

“Again, we have the same question,” Delta approached him, a deceiving grin plastering her amused face. ‘Look at you, all grown up. Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome. Finally ditched the blond, huh?’ Teasingly, she lifted her hand to run her fingers through his hair but Zidane jerked away, backing up from her. “Aw, what’s wrong, Zidane? You always liked it when we paid attention to you.”

“What do you want?” Zidane’s voice was even, lacking rhythm.

“We want what’s rightfully ours,” Felicia told him, crossing her arms over her chest.

“And what would that be?” Zidane cocked his head towards her. “If you’re lookin’ for that pocket watch I nabbed from your room, I sold it to a fence less than thirty minutes later. I used the gil to buy Astrid a drink.”

“Of course you did,” Felicia shrugged carelessly. Her sword shifted on her hip. “We’re after something a little bigger than a pocket watch, Zidane.”

“We’re here doing the same thing as you,” Delta gestured with wide arms to him. She paced slowly. Zidane pursed his lips together. “We’re scopin’ the place out. We’re doing the legwork for Astrid while she builds the structure.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Zidane furrowed his brow. He could hear the blood throbbing in his ears. “What does the Alexandrian Castle have anything to do with you three? What, Molly can’t feed you anymore? If you’re looking for heirlooms, good luck. Just take a damn painting off the wall like the lazy thieves you are.”

Delta and Felicia exchanged amused looks. “Oh, Zidane, you’ve been gone for so long.”

“Molly’s dead,” Felicia said without much feeling. “Cancer took her. Good thing, too. The hideout was flattened by Queen Brahne just three weeks later.”

“So you’re here for revenge?” Zidane furrowed his brow. “Queen Garnet had nothing to do with that attack. She was against it.”

“We aren’t as emotional as you,” Delta shook her head. “We’re not after revenge. We’re after what’s rightfully Astrid’s destiny.”

“I’m not following,” Zidane shrugged, holding his helmet in his hands now.

“Astrid is the rightful Queen of Alexandria.”

This made Zidane laugh, a slurry of memories rushing by him of all the times she’d pretend to be Garnet just to get a free drink or be given some sweet treat from a vendor she saw on the street. He remembered all the times she introduced him as her bodyguard, who dressed casual for easier travel about the town. It had always worked. Zidane shook his head, smiling now. “Come on, just because Astrid bears a resemblance does not mean she will convince anyone she’s part of the bloodline. You’re talkin’ about a dynasty here.”

Delta came closer to Zidane, casually brushing her thick braids from the frame of her face. She cocked her head slowly at him, all the while smiling. “What if I told you,” She said, quietly and full of enunciation. “That we have proof Astrid has the Alexandros blood in her? That we can prove to everyone Queen Garnet does not?”

“I’d say you’re full of shit,” Zidane told her, their faces only inches apart. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Did Baku ever tell you about his past with Molly?” Felicia asked, lifting her eyebrows.

“Yeah, it was a relationship gone wrong.”

“Because of Baku’s jealousy.”

“Because Molly was a philandering flirt.”

It was Delta’s turn to laugh and she walked a few paces from Zidane. “Baku’s masculinity was always so threatened. He was especially jealous when she met Emet Conzanta-Alexandros. How could he compete with such a refined, dapper, gentleman?”

Zidane paused, looking to the girl’s intensely. His heart rate accelerated. “What did you just say?”

“King Emet was so sad when Molly met him,” Delta continued. “His daughter’s health was failing and nobody had answers. He knew she’d be dead soon. His wife was in shambles, she couldn’t even look at him. So he turned to comfort from strangers. And Molly gave him the greatest gift of all: a new daughter, whom they lovingly named Astrid. But, of course, he couldn’t be with her. He had a family and a kingdom to run. And just so magically, another girl, of similar features, washed up on the shore years later and Emet no longer needed her.”

“Now you’re really full of shit,” Zidane sneered, his eyes bright and intense. “Molly lied to you. There’s not a single way in hell the king fathered a bastard child and nobody ever knew about it.”

“That’s fun the part,” Felicia grinned. “It really did happen. We have the proof and we’re bringing the truth out. And there’s absolutely nothing you can do to stop anyone once all the lies are uncovered.”

“Astrid doesn’t know the first thing about being a Queen—”

“We have to be going,” Delta yawned. “We have work to do.”

Zidane ground his teeth together, watching as they walked away with their swaying hips and inflated egos.

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Steiner hadn't seen Beatrix all day. Twilight was breaking across the sky and cicadas chirped loudly as he let himself into their living quarters. It was quiet inside, all the lamps and candles were lit. The kitchen was unoccupied, a pot of peppermint tea abandoned on the stove top. Slowly, Steiner pulled his helmet from his head, running his hand over his short dark cropped hair. It was getting long again. It was almost time for a trim. He set his helmet on the entry table and peered around the corner into the living space. No one was there. The books were all neatly packed onto the shelf. The balls of yarn were settled in their respective wicker baskets. A glance down the narrow hallway only showed him the dark bathroom and their closed bedroom door that had a pool of light coming out from beneath.

"Beatrix?" Steiner's voice carried through the tight living space. He heard no shifting and no voice responded to him. Maybe she was asleep, he told himself, as slowly he began down the hallway. He didn't want to disturb her so he walked carefully

with his armor draping his broad body. Steiner stood outside their bedroom for a moment, listening. There was nothing to be heard. Cautiously, he began pushing the door open, craning his neck to see in. The bed was empty and still neatly made. It was obvious she hadn't been in it. But a shallow whimpering met his ears and he turned his eyes towards the window. Beatrix was crumpled beside the body-length mirror tucked into the corner of the room. She sat on her knees, her face in her hands. 'Beatrix?!' Steiner was quick to come across the room, kneeling to be beside her. She lifted her flushed face. It was always very rare to find Beatrix in tears. It was jarring to Steiner and his heart beat rapidly in his chest. He draped his thick arm around her shoulders. "What's wrong? What is it?" He asked, nearly in a panic.

Beatrix blinked her heavy, wet eyes rapidly as she gazed towards their reflection. She felt so weak in that moment, condensed to her knees. It was more humiliating than being bested in a sword fight. She was so used to bringing people to their knees. Now she truly understood how frustrating and terrifying it actually was. Her hands were shaking and she promptly lowered them. She shook her head, taking an uneven breath. "It's really happening, Steiner..."

“What is?” He shook his head, knitting his bold brown together.

More salty tears skidded down Beatrix’s face and she pressed her hands to her abdomen. “I’m starting to show. My vests are tight. I really am pregnant and everyone is going to know.”

“Nobody will think any differently of you,” Steiner assured her, tenderly grasping her shoulder.

Beatrix pursed her lips together and sorely dried her tears away. “It will change everything, Steiner. It will change how my soldiers perceive me.”

“No, it won’t—”

“Steiner!” Beatrix looked to him sharply, her cheeks growing red. “You don’t understand, alright?”

Steiner was quiet, feeling absolutely helpless. Beatrix was finding it harder and harder to cope each day. She still felt like she was floundering. Some moments she was okay. But then her reality fell in on her all over again, like a flash flood bursting through the door. She was unnerved by her future. She was scared. As much as she hated to admit it, she was terrified. After brandishing a sword all her life, sending commands out through icy



storms and over raging winds, the thought of a baby had her feeling helpless. Beatrix had always lived by her sword, she had been a general for more than half her life. What would she be, if not that? How could she even think to call herself a mother? She wasn't the least bit cut out for it and not a moment passed when she wondered how all of this could possibly happen.

A knock at the door had them both looking over their shoulders towards the narrow hallway. Beatrix ground her teeth together. "Who could possibly think it's an appropriate time?!" She rubbed at her hot tears.

"Stay here," Steiner told her, tilting his shoulders to head towards the door. When he opened it to the milky moonlight and rush of chirping cicadas, he was surprised to see Zidane standing there. A gleaming layer of sweat plagued his skin, his hair stuck to his forehead. Zidane's shoulders rose and fell as he stared at the rather surprised captain.

"We have a problem," Was all he said with his tense voice.

# Chapter Fifteen

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## Chapter Fifteen

The full moon sailed through the night sky and the owls hooted as the darkness waned on. Steiner and Zidane sat at the captain's small kitchen table. They had poured themselves coffee, but their troubled minds did more to keep them awake rather than the caffeine. Zidane watched with his tired glazed eyes as Steiner nervously ran his hands together, wringing them tightly. Steiner took in a deep breath, his nostrils flaring, as he gazed out the inky window. Zidane blinked rapidly, glancing around the small kitchen. The chirping cicadas kept his nerves on edge. All day as he worked diligently beside Garnet, all he could think about was what Delta and Felicia had said to him. And Astrid's sharp words in the bar continued to echo down his cold spine. Steiner rubbed tiredly at his broad jaw and heaved a sigh.

"And you're... certain about this?" Steiner asked, looking across the table. "These girls... they are who they say they are?"

“Yeah,” Zidane sighed, falling back against his chair. His shoulders slumped, his white undershirt rumpling across his chest. “I grew up with them. I know them very well.”

“What kind of proof could they possibly have?” Steiner furrowed his brow. “Baku never thought to mention this to you?”

“Look, I don’t know,” Zidane shook his head. ‘I’m just as confused as you are. And I don’t know if they’re bluffing. If even you didn’t know about this bastard child the king fathered, what kind of proof could they really have? Sounds like something an unfaithful man would keep under raps. If she cuts her arm, she’ll bleed red just like Dagger. Looks aren’t enough. I’m sure there’s plenty of girls with olive skin and dark hair that could say they’re really the heir.’ The two men faltered into another silence of exasperated sighs and pounding heads. Zidane crossed his arms over his chest and huffed again, looking out the window where the silver moon fell over the neatly manicured hedges. “What’re the odds? This seems all a little too damn convenient.”

“What do you mean?” Steiner lifted his eyes from his coffee.

“I...” Zidane pensively licked his lips, looking to Steiner from where he slumped in his chair. “I used to see Astrid... romantically. She grew up just around the corner from me. Was more or less in the same profession as me. She used to pretend to be Dagger to win us free drinks. Of course... this was before I actually met Dagger. When I did meet her, I... I pretty much forgot about Astrid entirely.”

“Do you think this is revenge?” Steiner asked, straightening his shoulders.

“No...” Zidane shook his head, lowering his eyes to the table. “This trouble was brewing before they found out I was around.”

Steiner let out a sigh, rubbing at his stubbly jaw. His stomach stewed over what he was slowly piecing together. What could he do to ensure Garnet’s sanctity to the throne? Despite her not having been the true daughter of the royal bloodline, she had grown fittingly into the role. After all she had been through, becoming Queen was, in a way, her own destined right. The past year of her ruling had only proved that as quality of life in Alexandria and the population flourished.

“Well,” Zidane sighed, tilting his head back and blowing his dark bangs from his forehead. “I know

what I have to do next.”

“What’s that?” Steiner lowered his tense hand from his chin.

“I have to go to Lindblum and talk to Baku. I have to figure out what the hell this is all about,” Zidane pursed his lips. “Baku obviously knows something. I need all the information I can get.”

“But... you’ll be revealing yourself to him. Isn’t that what you want to avoid?”

“I don’t have a choice, Steiner,” Zidane shook his head, gripping his elbows tightly.

“But Her Majesty—”

“This is the only way to keep her safe right now,” Zidane sat forward. Slowly, he ran his tongue along the front of his teeth. “Steiner, bad things are stewing on the horizon again. Now is not the time for us to get our feelings hurt and our hearts mixed up. I have to protect her and I can only do that if I’m Zeke.”

“You really believe that?” Steiner’s dark eyes pierced him. “After all this time? And after everything you did for her when you were Zidane?”

“Things were different, Steiner,” Zidane shook his head. ‘*I was different.*’ They held a tense and quiet eye contact for a few beats. “I don’t expect you to understand, Steiner. There are some days I wonder the same damn thing. But after what I saw Astrid doing in the bar, after what Delta and Felicia told me... I have an awful feeling for Dagger. And I have to do everything that I can to stop this. Because Garnet’s the rightful Queen, blood or no blood.”

“When will you leave?” Steiner asked tapping his spoon to the lip of his cup.

“Tomorrow morning, with Blank,” Zidane told him. “Make a lie up to Dagger for me. I couldn’t stand to lie one more time to that pretty face.”

---

The next day, the wind was cool despite the onset of a sweltering summer. Zidane stood on the deck of the airship, letting the breeze rush through his disheveled hair. It felt good to not be in any armor, just a simple white shirt and tan slacks. They had just sailed past the tall and rigid mountain range that divided Lindblum’s jurisdiction from Alexandria’s. The Alexandrian castle was nearly out of sight now and, thankfully so, Zidane could only think. He was

worried sick for Garnet. And even more worried about himself. Would he be able to protect her? Could he stop what was going to happen? What even was going to happen? Zidane shifted back and forth in his boots as the wind continued to whistle past him. He shook his head. This seemed like some elaborate joke against him. Some sort of way to punish him for everything he'd done. Karma had come back around, the fool's errors of his way. He wondered what Garnet would be doing that day. He wondered if she'd miss him.

*Of course not, Zidane told himself. Not when she has Liam to keep her company.* He could only feel his insides twist and constrict at the thought. *Bastard...*

"Hey," Blank appeared beside him, shoving a cold bottle in his hand. "How 'bout a beer to chase the jitters away?"

"Jitters?" Zidane echoed, furrowing his brow. Blank took one big swig and grinned at his brother.

"It's gonna be like a family reunion!" Blank told him, rather joyfully. "But don't worry. We all know how to keep a secret. At this point, though, your covers getting blown pretty fast now."

“Yeah, well, the last person who needs to know right now is Dagger,” Zidane replied, looking forward. In the distance, the shiny, tall, and proud industrial city of Lindblum was beginning to emerge on the cliffs edge. Dozens of airships swirled around it, gravitated towards its magnitude and sheer power. “I’d say this situation is a perfect example as to why.”

“And why would you say something like that?” Blank’s red hair flopped over his forehead.

“Uh, Angel of Death?” Zidane shrugged, pursing his lips. ‘Reaper of Sorrow? Creator of Destruction?’ Zidane heaved a sigh and gave into drinking his beer. “Isn’t it just too coincidental the girl I got messed up with those few years ago would end up going after the woman I ultimately ended up loving?”

“Come on,” Blank shook his head. “Do you *really* think Astrid is King Emet’s bastard daughter?”

Zidane contemplated for a moment, swinging the wet bottle back and forth between his fingers. “I don’t know,” Zidane said, rather breathlessly. “I guess anything is possible, huh? No matter how much it defies reality or bends the rules? I think I



learned that the hard way... My main question would just be: how? And why would they sit on something like this for so long, after everything that has happened? And Molly? Of all people?"

Blank took a moment to drink his beer, chuckling in the process. "That woman had nothin' going for her. No offense, but if she couldn't even keep Boss as her man, she was probably at the lowest point of her life. The only way to make her feel better as a single mom was to primp her little girl into believing she was her own princess."

Zidane tapped his finger against the neck of the bottle. "Did you know Molly died last year?"

"Really?" Blank arched his eyebrows. "I didn't have a clue."

"Makes me wonder if that's what set Astrid over the edge to do all of this," Zidane shook his head. "Molly was all Astrid ever had, despite how she was treated by her mom. It's just funny she waited all this time until I magically showed up. It's like we're still connected."

"The Alexandros blood seems to love you," Blank gave Zidane an elbow and they both rolled their eyes.

---

The Tantalus hideout was hazy with smoke. Hunched at the table sat Cinna, Marcus, and Baku. Intently, they all stared at the cards in their hands, occasionally casting glances at each other. In the center of the slightly slanted table sat a pile of gil that glittered in the bright afternoon light. Cinna let out a huff, folding his cards down and shaking his head. There went his bar money for the weekend. Marcus grinned with his pointed tooth at Baku, who kept his face stony and serious.

“Lay ’em down,” Baku said, tapping his cigar ash onto the ground. Proudly, Marcus threw down a nine of diamonds and a queen of hearts. Baku let out a wheezy laugh from his years of chain smoking, laying down a king of spades and an ace. Marcus immediately cursed and ground his teeth together as triumphantly, Baku pulled in his pile of earnings. ‘I thought I’d taught you boys better.’ His shoulders bobbed as he carefully stacked his winnings. “I guess I should’ve taught you not to play against me.”

“I call foul play,” Marcus banged his fist to the table and the gil clattered together.

“Oh, shut your loser mouth,” Baku waved his hand off at him. “I won fair and square.”

“*You* shuffled the deck!” Marcus exclaimed.

“And *you* didn’t speak up then,” Baku grinned, bearing his yellowing teeth. “Besides, you know my arithmetic is shit. You really think I’d be able to shuffle the deck in my favor?”

“He’s got a point, Marcus,” Cinna said, resting his chin in his hand.

“You callin’ me stupid?” Baku gave him a side eye and Cinna audibly gulped.

In the next moment, however, the front door opened, shedding light across the grainy and still room. Cinna and Marcus peered around the broad shouldered Baku. The boss, however, didn’t even bother to look as he continued counting his gil out, knowing he’d have enough for a new box of cigars that evening. Baku stuck his cigar between his lips and shifted it about, inspecting the gil as if it was the most interesting thing in the world. The door shut just as quick, pushing all the glorious sunlight out of the room.

“You finally back, Blank?” Baku called out with his rugged voice, his eyes trained down. “I hope

your little vacation was enough to clear your mind.”

“It was...” Came Blank’s somewhat quiet voice. The stairs creaked as he appeared on the main floor. “But I’ve come back with some questions.”

“Questions?” Baku furrowed his bushy brow, turning in his stool towards one of his youngest son’s. Blank held his shoulders square. His hair was windblown, his cheeks somewhat rosy.

“Yeah, questions,” Blank nodded, shuffling his feet back and forth. “But they aren’t my questions to ask.”

“What are you on about?” Baku shook his head. “You oughta see someone about all this grief. It’s really gettin’ to your head, boy.”

Blank was still for a moment until he turned towards the stairs, nodding his head. In the next beat, everyone’s breathing stopped abruptly. The cigar fell from Baku’s mouth, sparking as it rolled across the floor. Everyone didn’t dare move a muscle. Their eyes were as wide as saucers. Marcus rubbed sorely at his face in utter disbelief. For a moment, they all briefly thought they’d all flown over the cuckoo’s nest. The man standing beside Blank, with his still and somewhat stony face,

looked exactly like the son and brother they thought they had said goodbye to a year ago. The only difference was his layered, disheveled, dark hair. His blue eyes, however, meeting Baku's, reminded the old man of the day he had found him, crouched beside the docks with whimpers and hunger pains. Baku stood, his stool scraping across the floorboards.

"What the hell is going on?" Baku sneered. "What kind of joke are you playin' on us, Blank? Is this some kind of revenge for us tellin' you to move on?! Where'd you get this crisis actor?"

"It's me, Boss," Zidane's voice was even and somewhat unnervingly calm.

"But *how*?" Cinna held his forehead now. "Where the hell have you been?!"

"It's a long story," Zidane shook his head, looking around the hideout. Not a single thing had changed. It was almost eerie. On the slightly crooked platform above, where all their beds sat unmade and knotted up, Zidane spied his old collection of airship models. He could almost shiver at how that felt like an entire lifetime ago. An entirely different Zidane used to lay in that bed and daydream. Now it sat empty, like his soul felt on

many days. “Look, I’ve been in Alexandria. I’m a Knight of Pluto now.”

Baku couldn’t help but laugh. He paced a few steps, throwing his hands at his side. “It’s just gettin’ better and better. How long have you been back?”

“About two months now,” Zidane told him, feeling a wave of shame wash over him. “But it’s not what you think—”

“You’ve been thinking about Dagger this whole time, is that it?” Marcus crossed his arms over his chest. Zidane bit down on his tongue so hard, he tasted copper.

“She doesn’t know I’m around.”

“And how is that possible?” Baku nodded his head towards his youngest son. “You’re just slinkin’ around in her backyard anonymously?”

Zidane tilted his head down, his dark bangs falling across his forehead. Blank took in a deep breath, pulling his shoulders back. “His name is Zeke Tisdoll there,” Blank said, looking around the room. “Dagger really does have no idea it’s him.”

“Zeke?” Baku echoed, arching his bushy brows. “What, you didn’t like the name I gave you?”

“It’s not like that at all,” Zidane lifted his bright eyes now. “I don’t expect you to understand, but... it’s hard to be Zidane nowadays, Boss. After what I found out about my true origins. Why I’m even here... I hate myself.”

“Whatever the hell that means,” Baku swung his arm out at his side. “You were abandoned in Lindblum for a reason, boy, and that was to become part of Tantalus. I’ve been around the block. I know a thing or two about fate. You weren’t the first boy I’d found on the streets.”

“I wasn’t just abandoned,” Zidane told him, furrowing his brow. The muscles in his body were beginning to tightly coil. “I wasn’t like Blank or Cinna or Marcus... My parents didn’t just decide they didn’t want me. I don’t even have parents. I never did.”

“And just what are you sayin’?” Baku crossed his arms over his chest. He was so tall and wide. Zidane could recall briefly the moments they had gotten into tiffs. He could almost feel the impact of his burly knuckles to his chin and stomach.

“You adopted a science experiment,” Zidane said evenly. “Me and Kuja... we’re the same. Except... I was the success and he was the failure.”

“So... when Kuja talked about the Angel of Death,” Cinna was slow to speak. “When he went crazy about the Reaper of Sorrow on Gaia...”

“It was me,” Zidane nodded. “I was what Kuja wanted to be. For Garland. For Terra.”

Baku shook his head, reaching down to swipe his cigar up. Furiously, he dug through his vest and patted his pockets down until he found his matchbook. The flame erupted and engulfed the end of the cigar. It wasn't much to his taste, anymore, but he puffed on it furtively, looking to Zidane. “And you let that dictate who you are?” Baku said, smoke trailing from his bushy beard. “You push away everything else that made you Zidane— like this family didn't mean a damn thing. You might think you're the Angel of Death, but you were my son, Zidane.”

Zidane's nostrils flared as he felt a rush of blood come over him. “I'm tryin' to learn that again, Boss. It's... it's not so easy. Besides you guys, only Steiner and Beatrix know I'm here. I'd love to be with my friends again but...” Zidane let out an uneven sigh. “Some days are easier than others. I want to let go, but I can't... I think I'll just destroy even more if I do. I feel like I have to do something



to control all of this but I just can't, dammit. I don't even know what I'm supposed to do."

"Well," Baku walked a few more steps, the room growing hazy again. "Why are you here, then? What is it that you're trying to accomplish?"

"I'm here to talk to you," Zidane said, coming a little further into the room. The floorboard creaked and another rush of memories came past him. It was the floorboard that one would want to avoid when sneaking out. Baku looked to him, holding his arms out as if to signal to shoot. "It's about Molly. What happened in 1783?"

Baku was still for a moment. "We broke up."

"Why?"

"You know why," Baku ground his teeth together, lowering his cigar. Ribbons of smoke wafted around his burly body. "Molly was clingy and obsessive. Not to mention possessive. Figured you would have learned that after gettin' messed up with that Astrid-girl."

"What do you know about King Emet?" Zidane held his face still and somewhat stony.

“And just why the hell are you askin’ me that?” Baku asked, stiffly.

“You were friends with Regent Cid,” Zidane said. “Who was also friends with King Emet. And I think they both did things that you turned your head the other way. Until it happened to you.”

“What are you on about?” Roughly, Baku snubbed his cigar out in the tray on the table. Both Cinna and Marcus were unmoving, watching the bizarre scene unfold before them.

“Molly and King Emet met, didn’t they?” Zidane tilted his head. “Boss, *please*, this is important. Dagger is in danger.”

The two stared at each other tensely. Everyone else only looked on. In their youth, Zidane had always been the one more inclined to butt heads with Baku. They would fight and argue and Zidane still remained without fear of receiving a beating. For the young men, it was like witnessing that all again. Zidane’s body was so tight, his hands curled into fists, as he looked at Baku. The boss, however, seemed to be waxing and waning; questioning himself. After a moment, Baku gestured towards the table.

“Sit down, Zidane.”

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1783

*The trees of Lindblum were beginning to transcend into light greens and slight oranges as the summer was coming to a close. Baku was feeling rather chipper that afternoon as he left the bar with a bag of jingling gil. His luck in poker never seemed to run out and, finally, he had enough to purchase something that had caught his eye in the window day after day. He headed merrily that way, the whiskey and rum putting almost a skip in the large man's step. He enjoyed the brisk wind that was starting to wax over Lindblum. He loved this time of the year despite the approaching holiday season. His boy's were always wanting the newest dagger and Cinna still hadn't quite outgrown his love for quills, which proved to be a useless expense to the grown man. He pushed that all aside, however, as he came to the gleaming window of the shop he passed every day. The tailor was somewhat uppity for a man like Baku, but sitting in his pristine window of delicate silks and fabrics, sat a velvet box containing a lovely set of gloves. They weren't very long at all, but sported a dainty lace that would flair from the wearers*

wrists. A neat black satin ribbon sat on the top. It was exactly the taste of someone he considered his beloved. Baku was somewhat of a sore sight in the store occupied by noble women in floppy sun hats and men with handkerchiefs, but he proudly made his purchase and managed to catch the aircab back to the theater district just as the evening sun began to bathe the city of industry in orange rays.

Once he descended the platform with the other tired looking workers, he headed the opposite direction of the Tantalus hideout, weaving down narrow alleyways of children scrounging for food and playing marbles and Tetra Master. The young adults of the theater district were beginning to emerge after working their hangovers off, congregating on the streets and steps with pipes and cigarettes, chatting about their next escapade when the full moon began to sail across the sky. Baku had known the theater district nearly his entire life. It never lost its charm. For Baku, the rest of Lindblum lacked a certain character the people living beneath the skyline had an affinity for. He had been fortunate, however, to have a forward facing townhouse that overlooked the most artistic culture of Lindblum. His beloved was much more packed away, and her attitude gave way to that feeling. The

*houses were somewhat slanted from years of stress and weather. Some windows were broken or carelessly patched with crooked boards. It was much noisier in the shaded portion of the theater district, as well, being directly below the airships paths of arrival towards the castle. Still, Baku would defend the theater district, and continue to be one of its biggest faces and names.*

*The door to the house he traveled to was somewhat sticky and he had to force his way in. The decor wasn't much different from his. Rather bland, all brown wood with little character. Usually, she'd be having a cigarette, dangling from the window and watching the sun set. When Baku came in, however, he found her at the communal table, her elbows pressed to the rigid surface. She didn't even look to him as Baku shrugged out of his ratty patched coat and discarded it on a chair. He glanced around the quiet space, noticing none of her girls were home. He wrangled through his rumped coat, however, and grabbed the velvet box, glad there would be nothing but silence around them.*

*"I've got a package for you," Baku said, coming to stand beside her at the table. "Here you are, Molly."*

*Her dark eyes were slow to look at what was in his hands. Her eyes even seemed somewhat glossy in the dank light of her house as she gazed up at him. Molly didn't even make a move for the box. "A package?" Came her soft, velvety voice. "Whoever from?"*

*Baku grinned, claiming himself a seat across from her and sliding the box closer. "A secret admirer, to say the least." Baku paused, however, sitting up a little straighter. 'What's wrong, Molly? You seem... sad.' She was quiet, her ruby red lips pursed together. Her jet black hair fell in beautiful waves, surrounding her heart shaped face. "A look in the box might make you feel better," He assured her. "Was it a long day?"*

*"Something of the sort..." Molly replied quietly, pressing her hands flat to the table. Still, she made no movement for the gift sat between them. "Baku, we need to talk. I've sent the girls away to make petty coin by the aircabs."*

*Baku's smile completely disappeared at this point and he only stared intently at her. "Talk? Well, I'm old enough to know what that means."*

*Molly was still for a moment. "What does it mean, Baku?"*

*“You’re endin’ things, aren’t you?” Baku shrugged. “What, we aren’t compatible after all? Two thieves who raise orphans can’t make it work?”*

*“It’s more than that,” Molly straightened her shoulders, raking her luxurious hair over her shoulder. Her dark eyes gleamed in the waning evening light. “We cannot make things work if we’re not in love, can we, Baku?”*

*“Not in love...” Baku chuckled breathlessly. “You’re tellin’ me you never loved me? Waiting on my door stoop everyday, wantin’ to get to know my own kids, following me around, always questioning where I’d been. That wasn’t your way of telling me you were interested in me?”*

*Molly tilted her head. “I never did think I could trust you, Baku.”*

*“And what’s that supposed to mean?”*

*Molly pressed her slender fingers beneath her pointed chin. “In a way, I suppose, I was testing you. I wanted to see if The Trixies and Tantalus were meant to be together.”*

*“I’m guessin’ you changed your mind,” Baku placed his hands into his lap, his eyes fixating on the*

now sorely misplaced velvet box on the table.  
“Where did I go wrong, Molly?”

“No where in particular,” Her painted nails gleamed in the orange light. “It’s just too bad you couldn’t be the man I wanted you to be for me.”

“And that would be?” Baku raised a bushy eyebrow.

“Just... better,” Molly shrugged now. “More put together. Not always winging things. More... practical.”

“Practical?” Baku echoed. “What the hell are you talking about, Molly?”

“I want a man with substance, Baku.”

“So? Did you meet one?” Baku gripped the edges of the table tightly now and Molly pursed her lips tighter. “You did, didn’t you?”

Molly smiled slightly. “It feels good to finally be able to say but... yes. Yes I did, Baku.”

“And what’s his name?” Baku felt his muscles grow tight at the thought. It had been a while since the burly man had given himself in to any idea of feelings. Life had been rather monotonous for him for years. Molly had brought an interesting spring to



*his step for the past fourteen months. And finally, he was beginning to think that perhaps he and Molly would make things work. Between Molly's light footed daughters and his quick handed son's, he thought The Trixies and Tantalus could have created something fun, something imaginative; a force to ripple the theater district, perhaps even the seedy underbelly life of Treno. But Baku could only curse at himself. He had no one to blame but his stupid brain and the blood that flowed through his body. He tried not to move or shake. He kept his face composed and still as he looked over the somewhat smug Molly. Why did she look so proud? What was that gleam in her eyes?*

*"He's a sweet, tender man," Molly said, tilting her head somewhat coyly. 'So much smoother around than edges than the piece of glass I realized I was stroking myself with.' Baku watched her tongue tenderly accentuate the words out and she grinned, in her annoying and somewhat sultry way. "He understands a woman has to feel a certain way. That's taught into you, Baku. It's not natural instinct like you think. He's a proper man. Not someone who drinks and smokes obsessively and hopes it all works out."*

*“Well, then, who is this fine man?” Baku kept himself still. On the inside, however, he was riveting at the thought of losing. Sometimes, he liked to pretend life was all just a game of poker. Predictable, if you watched people’s body language. And calculating, if you held your gut feeling close. “Is it Wendell down at the bar? You know he has a sweet spot for women down on their luck.”*

*Molly nearly rolled her eyes. “You wish it would just be someone you could whack right in the mouth, don’t you? Unfortunately, that’s not the case. If you’re so curious, though, his name is Emet. And he’s filled me with joy and given me the greatest gift of all. Better than whatever this velvet little box contains.”*

*“How do you know it’s better?” Baku asked, grounding his teeth together.*

*“He gave me something I always wanted,” Molly grinned, placing her slender fingers to the table. ‘And goodness, Baku, I’ve been dreading telling you for some time, but now that we’ve started the conversation... God, it feels so right. Not only does he make me feel like the woman I deserve to be, but,’ Carefully she brought her hands to stomach. “He’s given me a purpose. He’s given me life.”*

*Baku was quiet for quite some time. He rubbed at his gristly beard and ran his tongue along his teeth. After a moment, he came to his feet, grabbing the velvet box. “Well good for you. I guess after so many orphans, they start to become meaningless, huh? You gotta have something of your own flesh and blood. It’s funny, all men named Emet are—” Baku paused for a slight moment, scenes of Regent Cid grinning in his gleaming velvets, shaking hands, and gesturing flashing by him. “You’re lyin’ to me!”*

*“Oh, did you finally connect the dots?” Molly stood now. Her slender figure walked towards the window. Casually, she pushed it open and reached for a cigarette. ‘I’m not lying. What did you expect?’ She shrugged as the smoke drifted away from her. Carelessly, she tossed the match out the window. “It was quite a shock to know you were friends with nobles, but at the same time, a blessing. You’re a bad friend, you know that, Baku? Emet is in such despair about Princess Garnet’s failing health. His wife has completely shut him out.”*

*“He’s a king, Molly, what the hell do you think you’re doing?!” Baku threw his hands out at his side. “You’re playing with fire. Queen Brahne hears, she’ll behead you.”*

*“Oh, please, like Emet would let that happen,” Molly grinned, smoke trailing away from her like a ribbon.*

*“You really think you’re his world now, huh?” Baku ripped his coat from the wobbling wrack and violently shrugged into it. “That baby he put into you, Molly, is a mistake. As soon as everything works out with him and his wife and his little girl, you’ll be left all alone. You have no idea what it’s like to raise a child from the ground up. You’ll regret this.”*

*“We’ll see whose laughing, Baku,” Molly grinned, tapping the ash out of the window. “I’ll see you around, huh?”*

*Baku pressed his hand tightly to the rickety brass knob. “Keep your daughters away from my sons!”*

*“I wouldn’t dream anything else.”*

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The hideout was silent as Baku only looked out the window. Zidane was quiet as he pressed his knuckles to his mouth. He felt his brothers eyes on him and he took a deep breath, hunching his shoulders. He looked to the side of Baku with a

wave of regrets. He could have been a better son. Maybe even a less passionate one. Zidane even regret asking him. It was as if he had ripped open an awful wound. One that never healed correctly and had always left a nasty scab. But Zidane couldn't stop the words fizzling in his belly.

"You knew this whole time?" Zidane lifted his eyes to Baku. The boss looked to him with a face he wasn't quite sure he had seen. One of total fault? Baku was never one to admit that. His word had always gone. "Even when I was talking to her, getting to know her, you didn't think to tell me?"

Baku pursed his lips behind his bristly beard. "That's why I told you to forget about her when Regent Cid enlisted us."

Zidane took a breath and looked away, his finger poised beneath his chin. "I thought it was for her safety..." Zidane met Blank's dark eyes, halfway hidden beneath his drooping headband. Zidane sighed, deeply. "But you were just trying to protect your ego."

"That's not how I wanted it to come across," Baku reached for a cigar that had been half smoked. "I just... it's hard to think about."

“Yeah, cause you got *dumped*,” Marcus tugged at his bandanna, tilting his head down.

“And hard...” Blank muttered.

Baku was quiet a moment, his eyes trained on his cigar. Zidane was perfectly still, staring at the knots in the table like they were the most interesting thing in the world. “Yeah,” Baku pensively licked his lips. “That’s the thing about love. It hurts...” Again, he seemed to flounder into his mind. “It does strange things to you... I guess that’s why we got a brunette Zidane sitting here. It’s, uh...” Baku cleared his throat and reached out, giving Zidane a pat on the arm, rather than a punch. “It’s good to have you back, boy.”

# Chapter Sixteen

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## Chapter Sixteen

It was a dreary summer day in Alexandria. The rain came down rhythmically and steady. A dense fog lifted from the river surrounding the tall Alexandrian Castle that pierced the gray and monotonous sky. The frogs croaked and the branches of the garden drooped as the raindrops glided over the velvety leaves. Garnet took her time dressing. She had opted for a black corduroy skirt with several large, flashy buttons. Carefully, she tucked a baby blue blouse into it, rolling white stockings and zipping tall black boots over her legs. She let out a sigh as she flicked her hair from her face and stepped from her sleeping chambers. It was even more of a disappointment, however, when her bodyguard was no where to be seen. Garnet had grown quite used to having Zeke around. He was clever and precise. It was almost as if he knew all there was to wrangle with and work through as a monarch. In a way, she felt connected to him; bonded. Just as she had been to Doctor Tot as a child. He was a presence that comforted her. Part of her longed to know Zeke better. She knew he was

hesitant only because she was a Queen and he was a soldier. She understood the unspoken invisible barrier, yet someone had once taught her those walls could be scaled, no matter who you were or where you came from. Garnet wanted to hear about his life before the war. How it was living in Lindblum. She wanted to see his whole face. Garnet hoped he knew she was thankful for him and all he had done for her in the short five weeks he had become her bodyguard.

Garnet walked quietly down the massive hallways. She glanced towards the stained wall-length windows, watching the sheets of rain wash down them. Steiner had told her Zeke had to return to Lindblum for some family matter. Garnet hoped everything was alright. She tucked her hands behind her back as she continued forward, heading towards her private study. The weekly hearing would be happening tomorrow. She worried Zeke wouldn't be there to help things go smoothly. She had many documents to read and several response and decisions to make that gloomy day. The rain pounding against the glass panes nearly reflected the inner storm that raged within her. Every day was the same thing. Endless tasks, the hapless feeling of being trapped, and an awful longing that burned her



insides. She wished to see her friends more. Freya had spearheaded the rebuilding of Burmecia. The completion was nearing, along with the design she had made to memorialize Zidane in the garden. Eiko seemed to be doing well in her new role as a Lady. (In waiting, she liked to add.) And Garnet was so proud of Vivi, dedicating his life to living in Black Mage Village, teaching the Mages and Genome's alike how to live in such a confusing world. Garnet could only hope the alchemy studies were aiding Vivi in finding out how to lengthen their lives. But Garnet couldn't always be in the know. She couldn't travel as much as she used to. She was stuck in her cage yet again, like a helpless little bird. Garnet pursed her lips and sighed, pushing the door open to her study.

She held in a sigh, however, when she entered the spacious room to find Liam stretched out across the velvet chair angled by the bookcase. Near him sat a silver tray of warm, steaming coffee. He grinned when he saw Garnet enter the room. She was tense for a moment before she hesitantly closed the door behind her. In the two days Liam had acted as guest at the Alexandrian Castle, she had come to realize he didn't know much about the business of being a monarch. His nature was much more inclined

towards the rather different schedule of an engineer. Though he was smart and interesting, he slowed Garnet down by quite a bit. She hadn't made even half the progress in forty-hours with Liam around that she would have with the presence of Zeke. Garnet's heart pounded in her chest, however, and she lowered her eyes. How could it be? She thought to herself. The past year she had been so guarded. So tender. So absolutely spent, emotionally. And here she found herself thinking longingly of someone. And a Knight of Pluto of all people. Garnet felt her face becoming warm at the idea. She wasn't infatuated with Zeke. She simply enjoyed his vibrant nature, his carefree attitude. She desperately needed him to keep her grounded, she realized. It wasn't love at all. It wasn't like that in the least, she convinced herself.

"Good Morning, Your Majesty," Liam grinned, gesturing towards the other velvet chair angled towards him. "Such a dreadful morning. I was going to request a coffee date with you in the blossoming garden, but the warm, cozy study will have to do instead."

"I'm afraid I don't have time, Liam," Garnet shook her head, heading straight towards the massive table. The surface was in complete disarray

as Garnet had painstakingly sifted through them alone yesterday, Mullenkedheim posted outside her door. “There’s a hearing tomorrow and I have a lot of work to do. You’re welcome to stay, but I must focus, I apologize.”

Liam watched Garnet for a moment as her slender body worked on dragging envelopes and parcels closely, all the while scribbling across parchment an array of notes. The young engineer was still determined as ever. Perhaps his mother and Lady Hilda had talked him up a wee bit too much and perhaps Garnet’s feelings were not as passionate as Liam once thought. Yet he was still not at all swayed by Garnet’s somewhat passiveness to his prodding. She was a Queen, anyway, Liam told himself. A woman of that caliber required some work. But she would all be worth it, he thought, lifting his saucer up to blow the steam away from his coffee. He would find a way into her heart. What could some boy she knew a year ago do to secure himself into the chamber of her heart forever? What would prevent Liam from finding space for himself? Nothing, the young engineer was certain. His mother and Lady Hilda were sure in their thought he’d return home from his little mission with Garnet’s heart in tow. He came to his feet, moseying towards

her casually, his dark jacket gleaming on his shoulders as a bolt of lightning came down.

“At least drink your coffee,” Liam said gently, pressing a hand to her shoulder and sliding her clanking saucer and tea cup into her field of view as she pored over all the letters. ‘You need the brain power, love. You have a nation to run.’ She hunched her shoulders for a moment, keeping her eyes down. Zidane hadn’t ever called her such a thing. She didn’t know how it made her feel. She nearly shook her head, flustered, to be comparing people to someone like Zidane. It wasn’t fair, she reminded herself. Garnet felt like she couldn’t comprehend much at all in that moment beside the bone-crushing weight of her feelings and stress washing over her. “What can I help you with?” Liam tilted his head and his dark locks tumbled across his forehead. “Do we need to organize these things?” He reached towards envelopes, not having the slightest clue as to what he was looking at. But still, he began making stacks. Garnet felt a flash of annoyance ring through her, but the ever patient, tongue-holding Queen, paused.

“You’re stacking civil and equity requests together,” Garnet told him.

“How do you know the difference?” Liam asked, turning an envelope in his hand.

“Look at the postage stamp,” Garnet said. “East Alexandria is in desperate need of civil utilities. And West Alexandria needs equity in their business quarter.”

Liam paused for a moment, studying Garnet’s face. She hated the warm feeling that came over her. “I don’t know how you keep up with all of it.”

“That’s the thing,” Garnet shook her head, reaching for another parcel. “I don’t. I do what I can.”

“You know,” Liam licked his lips and grinned. “That’s what makes you amazing, Garnet.”

She kept her eyes trained down as thunder rumbled overhead. “I’m not. I’m just doing my job.”

“Garnet,” Liam grabbed hold of her arms and turned her towards him, tearing her away from her work. “Give yourself more credit! You’re more than just some machine who reads and writes and churns out orders. You’re someone who cares about their people. And I mean all of them. You’re not like Regent Cid. Lindblum is so large, he can’t worry himself with *everyone*. People always think the

monarch sits fat and proud on their silky throne, but you've changed my mind about all of it, because you're so observant and caring. You work yourself down to the bone, day and night, it doesn't matter when! You care and that's what's important. What I wouldn't give to live a homely city like Alexandria, knowing you're watching over my wellbeing and peace."

Garnet looked to him with glassy dark chocolate eyes. His words rang throughout her entire body, nearly making her core shake. Still, within her, she didn't want to accept these words or give in. She thought Liam to be a fine person, smart and full of all sorts of ideas, but now it was becoming all too clear to her what everyone else had in mind. How picturesque, she thought to herself, would it be to see a Queen and lead engineer from Lindblum wed. Between his ingenuity and tasteful apt of improvisation versus her calm and calculating ways, the tabloids would never get enough of them. But it was all wrong to Garnet. She couldn't give into that and all the royal life brought with them. Fleetinglly, she thought about how she wasn't even born to this life. It was only her burden to bear, she felt. But when she looked to Liam, she felt awful to admit that she just didn't feel anything. There wasn't that

*spark*. She thought back to a year ago, how with Zidane it all felt somewhat natural. How odd a request she had made to be kidnapped and yet, he had made it all so easy. And the nature of his being, from the beginning, had brought great ease to her. How she missed that, she realized, as she stared at Liam's somewhat happy and stoic face, as he looked to her with eyes of adornment and respect. Garnet felt awful in that moment as she knew she would never be able to reciprocate. How could she? She would be nothing but a weight to anyone who wanted to be with her. Garnet didn't want any of this. And that's when a chill and a heat began to build in her body. Suddenly, it seemed like a weight had come over her. She could see what felt like a lifetime of memories rushing by her, flashing through her eyes. She could see that sweet blond hair, those bright blue eyes. His reassuring voice rang through her ears. It all became so muddled before her as she realized she was only acting autonomously, like a machine. Do her business and get out for another night alone in the darkness. She realized she was being unfair to so many people. Not only herself, but to the people she lead, Steiner and Beatrix, and especially Zeke. She understood in that moment that, perhaps, she was using Zeke as a placeholder. It wasn't right.

“I appreciate the sentiment, Liam,” Garnet was nearly breathless as she became aware of his hands gripping her arms. “But I have to work and... I apologize. I do not have time for this.”

Liam was quiet a moment, shaking his head. “When will you have time for anything, Garnet?”

“I don’t know, Liam,” Garnet pulled away from him, rounding the table. “I can’t give you a number or any exact measure of time. There’s no way to gauge grief.”

Liam pursed his lips and uselessly ran his hands along all the confusing inquiries that Garnet was magically supposed to know what to do with. His tongue skimmed against his teeth and he watched as Garnet raked her hair from the frame of her face, doing everything in her power to not look at him in that moment. “Tell me about him,” Liam said and Garnet paused, looking towards him with arched eyebrows. “Zidane, was it? What was he like? What did you two talk about and do together?”

“Liam, please!” Garnet’s eyes had become wet now, as wet as the windows washing in her inner turmoil behind her. “I have a lot of to do, this isn’t the time!”



Liam was quiet a moment before he nodded and turned stiffly, leaving the room. Garnet let out a frustrated sigh, sinking into a nearby chair. Maybe Blank was right, she told herself. Maybe she was driving herself crazy, tormenting herself, for allowing all the biggest questions to go unanswered. But she felt a mental road block. Something stopped her. She wanted to know the truth, yet she knew the truth would only break her more. She rubbed at her face as another wave of anguish and frustration washed over her. What was she going to do? Every day, she only dug herself deeper and deeper. A bolt of lightning outside illuminated the side of her distressed face and she fell against the back of her chair, sighing again. She felt awful. Garnet had lost her temper on Liam. She hunched her shoulders, digging her palms into her lap. If Hilda heard about this, she would be in for relentless chastising. But what could her Aunt Hilda possibly know? She couldn't feel what Garnet was feeling and the Queen was at an utter loss to put it into words. Garnet looked towards the windows, still washed out in the downpour. How could she make anyone understand? They'd all look to her as if she lost her mind. They all knew vaguely what she had been through, but they couldn't comprehend the half of it and what she had seen and learned. Garnet's entire life had been

lavish and comfortable leading up to her faithful sixteenth birthday. How could anyone believe she could fall in love with a man such as Zidane? Though he had helped everyone tremendously and was always a beacon of light, Garnet knew Lady Hilda only clucked her tongue at him. He was nice enough, sure, but good enough for a Queen? Hilda would probably say otherwise. And that hurt Garnet. What she shared with Zidane was so precious. Hot salty tears sprung to Garnet's eyes as she was overwhelmed by the thought of Zidane again. She loved him, she told herself. And the tears only came faster. Blank had caught the airship to Lindblum with Zeke and she cursed herself. She needed to speak with him. More than anything, Garnet wanted some normalcy and she was afraid she wouldn't find that or get any work done until Zeke came back. That also brought a lump of sorrow over her. It wasn't fair to put Zeke into that position. He was simply there to help. Not be her personal therapist.

Garnet lowered her head as a tear skidded off the end of her nose. What now?

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When Zidane began to rouse from his sleep that morning and hear the tweeting birds, a rush of panic

almost came over him. He opened his eyes to a ceiling that waxed and waned between familiar and utterly foreign. He twisted in his bed for a moment, sinking into the mattress he had once considered his refuge in his youth. When he sat up, he saw Blank in the bed beside him, already looking at him. Zidane let out a long sigh, raking his hair from his face. He blinked rapidly as the quilt tumbled down his erect body.

“Mornin’,” Zidane said, his voice husky with sleep. After a moment of silence, Zidane furrowed his brow. “What? Why are you staring at me like that?”

Blank shook his head, lowering his eyes. “Never thought I’d see the day where you’d be waking up next to me again.”

Zidane pursed his lips as he draped his arms across his legs. He looked at the faded patch quilt that covered the lower half of his body. Ruby had made it for him when he was only fourteen years old. It had been a cold winter that season. He could see her painstakingly made stitches that brought the different fabrics together. He let out a long sigh, glancing up towards the shelf of airship models above him. He remembered as a child staring at

them in the slanted moonlight, imagining all the places an airship could take him. Pensively, Zidane licked his lips. He felt as if, at this point, he had been further than what a ship was supposed to take him.

“It was nice being back here...”

“But you have to go back to Alexandria,” Blank looked forward now. The hideout was empty. Everyone else had already gotten up and gone about their day. It was no surprise to Zidane. Baku had been quiet the rest of the evening after the recounting of his time with Molly. As Zidane reviewed the story, his insides only constricted.

“I do. I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” Blank shook his head.

Zidane again was looking at the quilt like it was the most interesting thing in the world. “I know I’ve hurt all of you,” Zidane said slowly, running the fabric between his hands. “I quit the band, I disappeared, and I know a lot of this comes across as me not caring about you guys...” Zidane shook his head. “I didn’t know what we were in for when Boss agreed to that contract, Blank. How was I supposed to know that, ultimately, it was just tripping my

destiny into existence? Do you ever think about... what would have happened if Boss didn't take that contract?"

Blank was quiet a few beats, tangled up in his own sheets, as if his inner conflicts were coming to life and wrapping themselves around him, like the vines of Evil Forest. "I don't try to dwell on that," Blank shook his head. "Everything happens for a reason, right? We can't spend our lives thinking about the what ifs. I miss what we had before... all of us brothers hanging out together, doin' stupid things... but you had a greater purpose. I'm just an orphan who had an under aged mom that couldn't do shit for her child. But you... you had a reason to be here, even if it goes against all you wanted to believe. It doesn't define you or make you who you are today, but... you deserved to know, Zidane, for the better or worse. That's your choice."

Zidane kept his eyes lowered as his brother's words sank in on him. All those times they'd spent together within the walls they sat in now, slinking about Lindblum, trying to find entertainment and money in anything they could; it felt like an entirely different lifetime to Zidane. He could almost barely remember those memories they had forged together. And he knew, in his youth, those would be his

favorite memories. And yet, they failed to come before him, muddled in the whirlwind his mind was sent for. Zidane only shook his head, his dark hair falling across his forehead.

“Your jobs not done yet,” Blank said and Zidane looked to him with arched eyebrows. “Dagger’s in danger, Zidane. I saw what you did, with Astrid in the bar. I know what she’s doing. She wants a revolution with her at the head. She wants the throne.”

“But does she have proof?” Zidane shook his head, turning to Blank. “How can she *really* prove her Alexandros blood?”

“She doesn’t have to,” Blank told him, no rhythm to his voice. “When you lead a revolution, is there ever proof? As history goes, they follow those with the loudest voices and most ambitious minds.”

Zidane pursed his lips yet again, feeling the quilt rumple beneath his grip. Garnet in danger rang all kinds of bells in his mind. He’d do anything to secure her life and her sanctity. It just wasn’t fair, he told himself, and yet that’s how life was. Always throwing curve balls and things that puzzled their minds. He loved his brothers, he loved Tantalus, but just the thought of Garnet being in trouble sent him

for turmoil. He knew he had other things to tend to. Not just pertaining to Garnet, either. He had a mess of his own to clean up inside before he could even begin working on the other aspects of his life. He felt like he was finally understanding it, though. Perhaps even finding a groove. Maybe we he wouldn't have to be Zeke for too much longer. Zidane ran his tongue along his teeth and slowly nodded, keeping his eyes averted from Blank.

"I guess I know what I have to do..." Zidane let out a sigh.

"And what's that?" Blank pressed his lips together.

"I have to stop Astrid," Zidane looked to his brother. "She can't honestly think I'm going to sit by and let her get away with this? But... she does have me a bit over a barrel."

"What do you mean?" Blank turned his eyes on the window as a bird darted by in the bright rays of sun. Blank pulled himself from bed, in the next moment, looking about for his vest and belt.

"Well, they know it's actually me," Zidane told him, spying his crumpled bag where his armor lay to his dismay. Zidane staggered into his tan pants,

grabbing the stiff boots that by no means represented the Knights of Pluto in the fashion industry. “And for Dagger’s safety, she can’t know anything at all.”

“Why’s that?” Blank asked, furrowing his brow. He seated himself on the edge of the bed, watching as Zidane pulled on a fresh white undershirt.

“Because,” Zidane said as he grabbed his bag and tossed it on the disheveled bed. “If she knew it was me, she’d just want to get involved. I can’t have that this time, Blank. If Astrid wants a revolution, well, like the history books say; they’re out for blood. They’ll kill Dagger with no hesitation if they really want that throne. I’ve made the mistake once of letting her get too involved. Kuja almost had her killed just for some Eiodolon’s. That can’t happen this time. If I’m Zeke, she’ll be less inclined to try to talk me out of it and let me go alone.”

Blank sighed and fell across the bed, shaking his head. “You always gotta make things complicated, huh? It’s always just your way or the highway.”

Zidane paused as he stuffed a shirt into his bag, looking towards Blank. “What would you do in this situation?”



Blank snorted. “As if I’d ever have a Queen pining after me and a revolution brewing thanks to my ex-girlfriend.”

“Blank, really,” Zidane deadpanned.

“I’m being serious,” Blank sat himself up on his elbow. ‘My mom had me when she was fifteen, Zidane. What was she supposed to do? Magically grow up and know how to care for me? No. She took the easy way out and left me in the alley to become someone else’s problem. In a lot of ways, I’ve always done the same. Taking the easy way out, that is. But you... It might seemed a little screwed up about your origin, being a test tube baby and whatnot, but you know what, at least you’re destined to be something and a someone on this planet.’ Zidane was quiet for a few beats, casting his eyes down. The birds tweeted brightly outside the window as another promising summer day came through the smudged and dirty glass. “Is it all worth it?” Blank asked, tucking his arms behind his head as he watched the bland ceiling. “Is being desired and noticed worth all of this?”

Still, Zidane’s lips did not move as he pulled his bag over his shoulder. He gripped the strap tightly. “I don’t know,” Zidane shook his head, moving

slowly towards the ladder of the slanted platform. He paused and furrowed his brow. He reviewed his life, as much as he could, in that moment and pensively licked his lips as he felt his stomach tighten. "I've never really known any other way, I guess. It's just... how it's always been."

The ladder began to creak under Zidane's weight. Blank sat up, arching his eyebrows. "Zidane," He called, making his brother pause. Zidane cocked his head back up over the mismatched wood. "You love her, right?"

Zidane furrowed his brow, a smile almost threatening to come across his face. "Yeah... I think so."

"It's for real?"

"Yeah, Blank, it's for real," Zidane nodded, the smile breaking out now. "I don't usually go to the center of the universe for just any girl."

Blank bobbed his head, smiling back at Zidane. "Yeah, she's a keeper, I guess, huh?"

"I think so," Zidane nodded.

"Well, go get her."

Zidane grinned lightly and the ladder groaned as he carried himself down. Blank listened to his light footsteps across the floor and watched as the slanted daylight cut through the hazy room and disappeared just as quick. Blank heaved a sigh and hunched his shoulders, glancing towards the tall window with the day awaiting him outside. Behind him, the silence was suddenly very thick.

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Zidane was surprised to see it was raining in Alexandria as the airship glided past the open plains with narrow, windy rivers. He was hopeful it would have been vibrant and sunny, just like Lindblum was. It was only fitting, he thought, as he began pulling his armored uniform onto the bench of the cabin, preparing himself for the descent into the castle. Zidane rubbed at his forehead before he began to work on looping the belts around his legs. It was time to start taking action, Zidane told himself. Right now, so doing this asinine undercover gig wouldn't all be for nothing. Blank had also partly inspired him. His family, too. In the brief twenty-four hours he was there, for the first time in months, Zidane felt like he could be himself. But now, he only thought about how he sailed straight

back to his cushioned persona of Zeke Tisdoll. He sighed as he finished lacing the belts on the side of his thigh and he reached for his chest plate. Zidane paused, however, as he looked at the armor. It was in desperate need of a polish. The beginning of inklings of rust were beginning to form at the contours of the crest of Alexandria. He pursed his lips and slowly ran his fingers along the grooves.

*I'm just like Rusty, aren't I? All passion, no sense, huh? Good thing he's got Beatrix...*

Zidane shrugged into his chest plate as he felt the ship begin to lose altitude. He could hear the high pitched whistle as the engine groaned and worked at safely descending the airship into the dock. Zidane grabbed his helmet from the table and slung his backpack over his shoulder as he took the stairs to the deck. The rain was coming down steady and relatively hard. The ship was already glossy, gleaming brightly back at the gray blanket of clouds covering the sky. Distantly, thunder roared. The raindrops splattered and scattered away from his uniform and his dark hair was flattened in a near instant. But Zidane didn't mind much. He held his helmet beneath his arm, watching as the castle of Alexandria grew tall in sight. The airship was dropping rapidly to descend into the port in the

lower west wing. Zidane pressed his lips together. That evening, he knew he would need to speak to Steiner. Beatrix would know what to do, perhaps. Whatever revolution was brewing, Zidane was determined to not let it happen. It was for all the wrong reasons. His face was stone-like, rain gliding down his pale skin as the airship entered the coverage of the dock. Zidane secured his helmet over his squishy, damp hair, and nodded to Weimar as he brushed past. It was still early enough in the afternoon that Zidane felt he could go catch back up with Garnet. At least let her know his personal days had expired and he had returned.

When he entered her private study, he was greeted by the normal sight of several cluttered tables and desks. However, the scene was a little different than usual. Instead of finding a patient and graceful Garnet attending dutifully to each letter from her people, he found her sitting in a chair beside the hazy, wet window, with eyes that matched that weather outside. When she heard the door, Garnet looked towards him, blinking her wet and heavy eyelashes rapidly.

“Zeke,” Her voice was somewhat raspy. “You’re back so soon?” She came to her feet, looking to him with her stunned soggy eyes.

“Your Majesty?” Zidane could feel himself heating up again in his armor and his heart panged in hurt to see her so upset. “What’s happened?” He asked, coming towards her.

“Oh, Zeke,” Garnet shook her head and her face contorted in pain. “I’m just...” She sighed. “I just feel like an awful person. I snapped at Liam this morning. Everything is going so incredibly wrong today. I haven’t gotten any work done and the community hearing is in just two days. I am so behind. I didn’t mean to snap at him...” Garnet sighed, pressing her lips together. “It’s been a trying time, but I’m hoping it’s all over now that you’re here, we can get some work done.”

From beneath his helmet, Zidane felt his brow furrow. “What did Liam do?”

“Nothing, nothing...” Garnet told him quickly. “He was just trying to be helpful and in my stress, I just... I sent him away, rather harshly.”

“I doubt you were as harsh as you think you were,” Zidane replied, turning towards the table. “I see the mail that came before I leave isn’t sorted yet.”

“Now that you’re here, I feel confident it will be,” Garnet straightened her shoulder and took a deep breath. In one deft move, she wiped at her soppy tears that were gathered on her flushed cheekbones. Just like that, she was trying to push the hurt from the frame of her face to take on the brunt of her kingdom. But Zidane knew her too well. She couldn’t so easily brush it away. Zidane sincerely doubted she was as ugly to Liam as she believed. She was much too tender and sweet to ever be too mean, even when she was at her breaking point.

“Let’s get started then,” Zidane said, already reaching for the nearest pile. Garnet watched as her dutiful bodyguard effortlessly looked over the postage. He was a quick learner, she marveled. She watched as silently he began making neat piles. Garnet reached out and grabbed his arm, making him stop. Slowly, he looked over his shoulder at her, his heart thundering in his chest. Her heart shaped olive face looked so emotionally hurt. It only reminded Zidane of the quiet, yet eventful task he had ahead of him to save her yet again. “Yes, Your Majesty?” He asked, once he realized they had only been staring at each other far too long. Outside, the rain continued to pelt against the windows.

“I am grateful for you, Zeke,” Garnet said, gently pulling his arm so he turned back towards her. “You were gone only a day and I realize just how important you’ve become to my role here. And you’ve come at such a good time, when everything is so much harder and more difficult. I could never thank you enough for what you’ve done.”

“Don’t mention it,” Zidane shrugged. “You don’t need a reason to help someone.”

The thunder overhead had him biting his tongue as he realized he let yet another stupid little phrase of his past self leak out. Garnet’s wet eyes had a flicker of recognition in them for a moment, but the stress and grief clouded her normal judgment. Garnet sprung forward in the next beat, wrapping her arms around his unpolished armor. Zidane was still for a few seconds before, slowly, almost hesitantly, he wrapped his arms around her. It was like a floodgate of memories erupted over him when he felt her slender body beneath his hands. He could suddenly remember all the little times, when they shared a small laugh, or bent over to catch their breath from hiking. He could see her rosy cheeks in the dry air of the Outer Continent. He could see her wet tears as she stood on the shores of the Iifa Tree. But all the smiles she flashed him suddenly



consumed him. Zidane pressed his hands to her back, his helmet tilting as he held her shaky frame. He could smell the faint scent of potpourri and pine trees. It was as if the beauty of nature just simply clung to her angelic body.

In the next moment, however, the door opened, and both Zidane and Garnet's heads lifted, their arms still entangled. Liam was standing in the door, a silver platter of cheese and crackers in one hand, a bottle of chilled wine and two tangled flute glasses in the other. Liam was still for a moment. Zidane began to pull his arms away from Garnet, as if he had done something wrong. Deep inside his gut, however, it was starting to burn with an entirely different feeling. Liam lifted his chin as Garnet took a few steps forward.

"Liam, I am glad you're back, we should talk," Garnet said.

"Why not just talk to your bodyguard, if that's even what he is," Liam replied, rather coldly. Zidane almost wished he could draw his sword.

"Liam, please," Garnet shook her head. "This morning started off all wrong, I apologize."

“No need,” Liam set the tray down, along with the glasses and wine. “Enjoy, Your Majesty.”

And he left just as quick. Garnet stared after the door for a moment before only silently looking to Zidane. What could possibly make amends at this point?

# Chapter Seventeen

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## Chapter Seventeen

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*Finally, it was cooling down. Astrid was always relieved when the sun didn't beat as hard on her neck. She knew she had to get out the sewing kit, however, to make sure her gloves and jackets would be able to keep her warm. As her boots beat against the cobblestone path, she tilted her face up towards the sun, letting her black hair fall down her back. The weather was so amazing, it distracted Astrid from yet another day of earning very little and stealing even less. Maybe it wasn't her forte, she wondered. But she wished it was, so her mother would be prouder of her. Astrid came down the steps and turned sharply left to cut through the familiar slender alley that would take her back to her house faster. She felt her heart flutter, however, as she saw someone familiar sitting atop a stack of grimy crates. He was wearing a dark gray woolen coat that was not very fluffy. Just enough, though, to still enjoy the cool breeze rushing over Lindblum. His windblown blond hair clawed across his forehead as*

*he craned his neck, taking a big slurp from his bowl of noodles. He seemed very content relishing in the steam rising from the bowl, using his chopsticks to tangle up another collection of noodles, dark and saucy. When his bright blue eyes spotted Astrid, he grinned in his typical boyish fashion and brought his legs to dangle off the side of the crates.*

*“Hey!” He said. Astrid couldn’t help but smile, her body warming despite the waning temperature. She stuck her hands into the pockets of her ratty cardigan, tilting her head back to look at him. “Want some noodles?” He slowly and steadily held the bowl down towards her.*

*“Sure,” Astrid nodded, with an airy laugh. She grabbed the bowl and quickly wound the noodles around the chopsticks. “Make some good money today, Zidane? These are udon noodles, very fancy.” She grinned as she slurped the noodles in, uncaring of being dainty or neat.*

*“Nah,” Zidane said, hopping down from the crate. His rucksack beat against his back as he rolled his shoulders and raked his hair from his face. “Mr. Conaczar went on break and left the simmering pots in his cart unlocked. I just helped myself. Get in there! There’s some narutomaki in the broth!”*

*Zidane came close to her, pointing towards the bowl. Astrid again felt herself smile as his scent wafted past her nose. Cedar trees, she thought. Something full of musk, she couldn't decide. But she was intoxicated by the aroma. She spent many evenings fantasizing how with the approaching winter, they'd cuddle together to keep warm as the chilly breeze seeped between the uneven floorboards of their homes.*

*"Yummy," Astrid flashed him her pearly smile as she speared the swirling fish-cake.*

*"Hey, I got you something," Zidane told her, almost sheepishly rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet.*

*"Really?" Astrid arched her eyebrows as a thick noodle bobbed against her chin. "What is it?"*

*"It's your holiday present, I wanted to give it to you early," Zidane said, setting the rucksack on the crates and undoing the flap. "Boss says we may have a few gigs comin' up that require traveling. Nothing in stone, but I figured I'd give you your gift early so you can't say I didn't get you anything." Astrid smiled as she lowered the steaming bowl, holding it against her thinning cardigan. What had her mother always been so worked up about over a*

boy like Zidane? She wondered if her mom simply didn't want to lose Astrid. The young girl couldn't deny that some days, it was tempting to race off into the orange sunset with her hand clasped in Zidane's. But she knew that was foolish, too. She didn't want to be away from her mom. Zidane smiled as he pulled a long black velvet box from his bag. It gleamed in the cool afternoon light as he offered it towards her.

"For me?" Astrid asked, setting the bowl down and hesitantly reaching for the box.

"Yeah, of course," Zidane nodded. "I don't even steal for my brother's. And I don't think they'd like this gift."

Astrid smiled but still hesitated a beat before she carefully drew the lid up. Her heart immediately lifted and she gasped sharply. Laying in front of her, in the palm of her hand, was the most thoughtful gift she had ever received. A thin golden chain delicately ran the length of the box and at the end, there was a glimmering garnet with many facets that caught the afternoon light several different ways. It reminded her of their summer of escapades, swindling barkeepers, merchants, and anybody under the sun for their goods and services under the guise of

*Princess Garnet on vacation. She could feel her stomach swelling up with joy and happiness. How divine, she thought to herself, was it to experience this kind of love. As she looked to Zidane, she felt she finally could confidently say she loved him. Astrid bounded forward, pressing her lips to Zidane's.*

*"It's perfect," She told him, inspecting the box once more.*

*"Here, let me put it on," Zidane said, pulling the chain from the velvet case. Astrid smiled as she swept her dark hair aside. The garnet was cool against her collarbone and tenderly she brought her fingers up to touch it. "Looks good, Your Majesty." Zidane told her, beaming all the while.*

*Astrid smiled at him, tilting her head. "Let's go out for a drink."*

*"You're the princess," Zidane nodded. "Lead the way." She was magnetically drawn to his side, linking her elbow through his.*

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*That very same garnet dangled in front of Astrid's eyes as she held it out, her arm resting on*

her risen knee. The evening dusk was beginning to fall through the smudged windows of the pub she inhabited. The evening drunkard crowd would be staggering in from a long days work soon. They had been an eager crowd, ready to cast aside the stress and fatigue of their jobs for something in exchange from the throne. But until they made their appearance, Astrid simply lounged on a love seat in the corner of the bar, drinking cheap ale that was on the house from the barkeep who was in favor of her words against Queen Garnet. Astrid let out a wide yawn, her dark eyes patiently following the swinging jewel. He had been on her mind a lot. When she first spotted him in the bar, she thought she was simply seeing things. But there was no mistaking the scarred Blank beside him, with his feisty red hair. Delta and Felicia had had a conversation with Zidane, too. It was a bizarre thought that she hadn't quite processed yet. She wondered what he thought of the ordeal. But in the next beat, she told herself she didn't care. She tilted her head and pressed her lips together as she realized she was slightly curious about him and why he was also part of the guard team at the castle. Just a bit, though. Not a lot, actually, she told herself. She didn't want to care where he'd been for the last two years. But still, she wondered...



The door to the bar swung open and the orange rays of dusk lit the smoky and dank room up. Astrid sat up, arching her eyebrows. It was a fresh face that was much different from the normal crowd. And Astrid smiled as she realized she recognized him. Sir Liam Winters, a head engineer for the Regency of Lindblum. Carelessly, Astrid balled the gold chained necklace into her hands, disregarding it into the pocket of her long woolen coat. She watched curiously, keeping her head cocked at an angle, her eyes wandering as to not draw attention towards herself. Liam gathered himself at the bar, touching his forehead in a somewhat annoyed fashion. He glanced around the room before signaling to the bartender. Astrid couldn't help but be so interested by him. Why would he be here, at a dank bar called *The Blind Fox* on a weekday afternoon? Wasn't he supposed to be at the castle? She had figured he'd be with the Queen, lazing away on chaise loungers and munching on chunks of cheese. Astrid tilted her head curiously, watching as Liam was served a scotch on the rocks. He took a pensive drink, tilting his head down. Astrid cautiously rose from her couch, pulling herself onto a barstool not too far from the somewhat enchanting, dark haired boy. He looked royally pissed, however, and she set her chin

into her hand and observed the quiet man while the bartender brought her another stein of cheap ale.

“Boris, that man looks so sad,” Astrid told him, her dark eyes peering over the foam of her drink. “Send him another scotch for me, will you?”

“He’s got Lindblum crests on his jacket,” Boris replied, setting a rumpled rag on the stained bar top. “He won’t be much help for your cause, Astrid.”

“He will, though,” Astrid grinned. “Trust me, Boris. Send the a man a drink for me... please?”

Boris gave her one more side eye before he went about tossing the cubes together. They clanked and settled as he poured the high shelf scotch his customers never asked for. When he set the drink in front of Liam, who was piling through his quickly, the young engineer seemed surprised. “I didn’t order this,” Liam said.

“It’s from the lady right there,” Boris told him, pointing towards the rather coy Astrid. She could tell Liam was surprised. Most people were when they saw her. Her entire life had primarily been double takes. There was no denying the likeness she bore to Queen Garnet. She was easily her twin, down to their button noses, heart shaped faces, and

gray streaked hair. Liam blinked rapidly, finishing his drink and reaching for the next. Astrid could only smile wider as she heard his chair creek. He came closer to her, seating himself beside her.

“Why, hello, there,” Astrid said.

“Hi, may I ask what your name is?” Liam tilted his head. His dark chestnut locks fell across his forehead.

“It’s Astrid,” She replied warmly.

“You, uh, you probably get this all the time,” Liam cleared his throat as the scotch burned at the very back. “But you bear quite a resemblance to Queen Garnet.”

Astrid grinned, taking a sip from her beer and coyly turning her head. “I’ve been told, yes, but it never loses it’s charm. I noticed you were wearing a Lindblum Airship Legion jacket. You’re a far way from home to be at *The Blind Fox*.”

“I’m actually in town visiting with Her Majesty,” Liam told her. Astrid used her skills of deception to light her eyes up, acting surprised and amused.

“And yet, you’re here, all alone?” Astrid stuck her lower lip out. “Is it a business trip?”

“Guess it’s starting to feel like one,” Liam smiled despite the deflated tone in his voice. He reached for his second complimentary drink and Astrid signaled for yet another one. Boris knew her well enough to bring a stein of cheap ale for her, too. Liam seemed surprised yet again that she had another drink brought to him. “So, what’s a pretty girl like you doing in a bar like this?”

“I suppose I could ask the strapping young man the same thing,” Astrid told him, pressing her slender fingers to her jaw. “You know, I’m from Lindblum, too. Born and raised. I’m also in Alexandria for business.”

“What kind of business?” Liam asked.

“The business of dreams, of course,” Astrid grinned. “I know a man whose down on his luck when I see one. And I also am privy to the tabloids.”

“Me and Her Majesty aren’t engaged if you read the *Alexandrian Tribune*. Those are just rumors.”

“And I feel like that bothers you, judging by the tone in your voice,” Astrid told him. “The Queen certainly does need a King, wouldn’t you agree? I know Queen Garnet has had a turbulent life and I know you, dear Sir Liam Winters, are trying nothing

more than to mend a broken heart, give her a new look on life. You're a good man, Liam."

Liam downed the rest of his scotch and moved for the third one. Astrid could only smile as she watched. "Well, I guess it's good the tabloids are portraying me in a favorable light. I was worried everyone would think I'm a gold digger or some creep trying to swindle the throne."

"Oh, how could anyone think that?" Astrid waved her hand dismissively. "You helped create the dart-ship! Modern travel and ingenuity. You're a trusted engineer of Regent Cid. How dearly we would all love to see a couple like you and Queen Garnet. You both looked so natural and dashing at the Airship Gala last month."

"Truth be told, it's not easy trying to court a Queen," Liam told her. "She could have anyone in the world, but she only wants one person."

"And who might that be? Is he better than you?"

"I don't know," Liam shrugged as another burning sensation came over his throat from the scotch. Each moment, he felt his body unwinding a bit. "He's missing in action, some man named Zidane. They're about to complete his memorial at

the Castle Garden. He apparently saved Her Majesty's life."

Astrid felt her heart thump in her chest and a wave of confusion drench her. Missing in action? The Queen building a memorial? Was no one aware Zidane was slinking about on the Knights of Pluto? Astrid assumed Garnet had put him into that role as a thanks for what he went through with her. But now, she could only wonder what the boy was up to. Still ever calculating, she drank her ale to stall herself, making sure to keep her face unmoving. "Hm, well, there's no point in dwelling on the past, am I right?"

"I wish Her Majesty would understand that," Liam furrowed his brow as he gripped his tumbler. Astrid quickly signaled for another. Boris was watching and listening carefully. Astrid had quite the slick tongue on her. Maybe she would help the staggering impoverished people of Alexandria, unlike the Queen, who only seemed to raise his taxes and inflict hardship on his wife's tailoring business. "What's done is done. It's been an entire year since she last saw him and still, everyday, she punishes herself."

Liam finished his drink in one swoop, already reaching for the next. Astrid placed her chin in her hand, bobbing her leg against the bar. “I hate to see a respected man such as yourself so down on your luck. You could also have anybody of your choosing and yet, the heart wants what it wants, right?”

“She’s brilliant and funny,” Liam shook his head. “My heart has its desires just as hers does, but... I’m right here, competing with a ghost who can do no wrong in her mind. When her mind isn’t occupied, conversation flows so easily. And I know our families would love to have us marry. Even Regent Cid is in favor of it. To see her pushing away is just... awful. It hurts my ego when I try so hard with her. I came here just to spend time with her, but it seems she doesn’t have any for me.”

Astrid smiled, placing her hand to his wrist. “What if I told you I could help?”

“And just how could you do that?” Liam lifted his eyes towards her.

“I told you I’m here on business. In the best interest of dreams and desires,” Astrid tilted her head, her dark hair framing her heart shaped face. “I know people in all the right places who make my job possible. People suffer everywhere in this world,

Liam. And I'm in the business of stopping that suffering. My dreams have only grown as we reel from the war and destruction of last year. Gaia was in dark times just months ago. Now I am even more passionate to make sure people are happy, well taken care of, and thoughtful in their life practices."

"So... what are you saying?" Liam shook his head as the scotch went down much easier now.

"I have something for you," Astrid told him, reaching into her cloak for a bag secured on her hip. Carefully, she withdrew a vial that was a light bubblegum pink.

"What is that?" Liam leaned in to examine it.

"It's a love potion, of course," Astrid grinned. 'Trust me, it's been tried and tested. It really does work. A friend of mine in Lindblum just had the most spectacular wedding back in spring. It's tasteless despite it's color, you can pour it into any drink without your intended beloved knowing. It will last a life time.' She raised the vile to come between their faces and Liam watched it, absolutely still, as the evening light glowed off the glass. "Endless days of love can be ahead of you. Evenings of affection, mornings of beautiful breakfast dates. Queen Garnet could be all your's, Liam."



He stared at it a moment before he shook his head. “It wouldn’t be right. I’d be essentially drugging her into loving me.”

“Oh, don’t think of it like that,” Astrid told him, lowering the vile. ‘You’re giving her the little push she needs to overcome her grief. You don’t like to see her so sad and stressed all the time, do you?’ Liam only shook his head again. “Exactly! With this little potion, you can help her blossom into the woman she is supposed to be, worthy of your love, and only focused on you.”

“I still don’t know,” Liam pursed his lips. “What kind of man am I if I have to slip a potion into her tea just to get some attention?”

“A good man who knows a woman’s worth,” Astrid replied. “You’re doing what’s best for her and Alexandria. How can she possibly be the best Queen for these people if she’s muddled in the details of her past? The throne is no place for a foggy, misplaced mind. She needs this, Liam. Just like the tabloids fantasize about, too. She doesn’t want to give in quite yet. We all know she will eventually. But we can’t let her keep suffering. Let’s speed the process up a bit and instill some trust in the shaky emotional foundation of the queen.”

Slowly, Liam took the vile into his hand and gave it a swirl. He simply stared at it, stewing in his mind. Boris brought him another scotch. “How... do I use it?” He asked, hesitantly.

Astrid grinned. “You need to be having tea with her alone. After she consumes it, you have to be the first person she looks at. If she even glances to a soldier nearby first, she will fall head over heels for them.”

“And it really works?”

“I swear it on my mother and father’s grave,” Astrid said, placing her chin in her hand again. “Do we have a deal, Sir Liam Winters?”

“What do I owe you?”

“Oh, just an invitation to the wedding,” Astrid smiled brightly.

Liam finished his drink and scraped his stool backwards as he stood. “Thank you. I suppose it was fate running into you here this evening. I have quite a bit to think about. I won’t forget you, Astrid of Lindblum.”

“And I certainly won’t forget you, King Liam.”

When Zidane arrived to the private study the next morning, Garnet was busy packing envelopes, looking towards the clock over and over again. She grinned politely when she spotted her bodyguard, right on time as usual. Her long green velvet coat accentuated her slender body as she worked diligently. Zidane jumped in after their greeting and they worked quickly to fill envelopes to be delivered that afternoon. The public hearing would be tomorrow. The people needed their answers before the moon rose into the sky. Zidane noticed, however, that Garnet kept looking at the clock.

“Is there something else on the agenda?” Zidane asked, wriggling a letter into an envelope. “Is there a deadline I’m missing?”

“Oh, no,” Garnet shook her head, her black hair ruffling over her shoulder. “I am having breakfast with Liam this morning. I don’t want to be late, that’s all.”

“Breakfast, hm?” Zidane kept his head tilted down as a warmth came over his body. “Would that make it a date, Your Majesty?”

“Of course not,” Garnet actually laughed and Zidane relished in the noise. “It’s only appropriate I accept despite how busy I am. You remember

yesterday... we had quite the tiff and it will be my time to apologize. We will meet in the sitting room for some pastries and teas.”

“Well,” Zidane said, sealing an envelope and placing it into the carrier bag for the messenger. “I’ll try not to let my mouth water too much from the corner of the room.”

“Actually, I’d like you to stay here and keep packing,” Garnet paused, looking across the table at him. “I’m sorry, Zeke. I hate to keep you cooped up in here, but I will return as soon as the meal is over. Anyway, I think it’d be good to not have any guards present. I can come across as more genuine.”

From behind his helmet, Zidane was biting down on his lip tightly. He didn’t want to picture Garnet sitting in her poised and proper way across the table from a dolt like Liam. Of course Liam was well put together and quite brilliant to work alongside Regent Cid in engineering, Zidane couldn’t help but despise him. But how could Zidane blame him? Man to man, Garnet was the epitome of everyone’s dreams with her thoughtful manner and dainty presence. And once again, Zidane only had himself to blame for all of this. Between the brewing of Astrid’s makeshift bid for the throne that he wanted to hit the

brakes on and Liam's lustful desire for Garnet, staying behind the helmet to protect her to his full potential was the only possible scenario now.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Zidane finally said after a few beats. He could taste of the copper of his blood on his tongue.

Hurriedly, Garnet sealed one last envelope, dropping it in the bag. "Thank you so much, Zeke. You're a lifesaver. I'll be back shortly to continue helping!" And with that, she turned and headed for the door. Zidane listened to the muted thud of her boots to the carpet and then the door shut. All by himself, Zidane sighed and closed his eyes. He tilted his head down and pressed his palms to the table. Steiner had been busy caring for Beatrix, whose belly was beginning to swell. She was staying well out of everyone's eyes. Zidane hadn't the chance to make Steiner understand what was happening in the lower regions of Alexandria. Astrid's words danced through his ears and he could see her cocky posture from where she stood on a stool, gathering everyone's eyes and ears in the bar. His heart only panged again as Liam's face filled his mind and his annoying deep baritone voice rang about.

“Dammit,” Zidane whispered to himself, shaking his head. He grabbed another envelope and pursed his lips. “Damn it all!”

Weren’t things supposed to get easier?

It didn’t take Garnet long to arrive at the sitting room just one level below. Liam was all by his lonesome, sitting at the white linen table that was cluttered in several silver platters of food with a shining kettle of tea sat precisely in the middle. He seemed to be fidgety, but Garnet chalked it up to being nervous. She, herself, was feeling even somewhat bashful knowing she would need to present a genuine apology so as to not be hearing from a Lady Hilda about her unbecoming attitude. When Garnet saw him in the fresh morning, she grinned at him. He looked well rested and didn’t seem pensive at all. He stood to greet her and there was a moment of awkwardness as Garnet held her hand out and Liam lifted his arms for a hug. Quickly, though, the calculated Queen went through the motion of giving him a friendly hug, slipping from his arms a beat too soon for his liking. As she seated herself across from him, she smiled again.

“I apologize if I made you wait.”

“No worries,” Liam replied quickly, spreading his linen napkin across his lap. “I’ve only been here a few minutes. I went ahead and poured your tea for you.”

“Ah, thank you,” Garnet told him, giving it a stir with the spoon. Liam felt his heart thunder in his chest as she looked over the dark liquid. Would there be any noticeable pink swirls? ‘It still looks quite warm and inviting, thank you.’ She claimed a blueberry tart first, however, daintily using cutlery to cut open the fluffy and layered treat. “It’s always nice to have a quiet and thoughtful breakfast every now and then. I usually eat in my private study while I work in the mornings. Thank you for having this all prepared, Liam.”

“Certainly,” Liam said, reaching for a cream cheese pastry now. His eyes flickered towards her tea momentarily before he took a big bite out of his breakfast. “I thought it’d be good of us to have a private chat. I will probably be returning to Lindblum soon.”

“I understand,” Garnet told him, pressing her napkin to her face despite there being no crumbs. ‘It was very kind of you to stay for as long as you have.’ She laid her cutlery down and gazed across

the table at him. In that moment, Liam was astounded how much the girl at the bar resembled Garnet. He wondered if it was her playing a trick on him. But he blinked rapidly, remembering Astrid had a scar running through her right eyebrow. Garnet's face was clear and devoid of any blemishes. He took a sip of his tea and watched her carefully. "Liam, I just want to say it now that I am so deeply sorry for yesterday. I was already quite overwhelmed upon waking up, but that is no excuse for the way I talked to you or treated you. You deserve so much more kindness than that and you are an honored guest of Alexandria."

"Your Majesty, I take full responsibility for our little tiff yesterday," Liam shook his head. His heart was beating so quickly in his chest, he thought it'd leap out onto the table between them. "I pushed and prodded and got the response I deserved. You are so busy all of the time and I was not understanding of that. I certainly hope it doesn't hinder our relationship."

Garnet could feel her cheeks grow warm and she lifted her tea cup, holding it close to her. Liam watched her intently as her slender fingers toyed with the handle of the cup. "It hasn't done any damage, Liam. Our friendship is still as strong as it's



been. I appreciate that we can talk about these things together.”

“Me too,” Liam said, keeping his voice steady. “Over a wonderful breakfast, too. You should drink the tea while it’s still warm. The chef did it absolutely perfect this morning. Just a little hint of ginger, nothing too overwhelming.”

“Oh, divine,” Garnet grinned. Liam watched as Garnet tilted her back. The tea *was* good that morning. She was so used to being busy, she could forget about her tea for hours on end and then simply suffer through a room temperature drink. The tea was so warm, though. She could feel it course through her body. And it was quite refreshing. Garnet closed her eyes for a moment as she lowered the tea, relishing in what a lovely event it ended up being. She felt she had returned to the same page with Liam and was grateful he was understanding. His heart was in the right place and she recognized that. When she opened her eyes to look back across the table at Liam, who was simply staring back with his forgotten breakfast, an unusual flood of emotion came over her. Liam was shocked for a moment as he watched her eyes flash to a light pink and then back to their dark chocolate look.

Garnet set her tea cup down and looked to Liam with an intensity he hadn't quite seen from her. "I don't want you to go back to Lindblum, Liam."

"What? Really?" Liam arched his eyebrows. "How come, Your Majesty?"

Garnet smiled and leaned across the table, placing her hand over his. "Stop with the formalities, Liam. Call me by my name."

"Well," Liam could feel a small grin coming across his face now as he realized it had worked. It seemed rather harmless, too. "I've been here for days, Garnet. Don't you think I've overstayed my welcome?"

"No, never!" Garnet said with emotions he had never seen surge from her. Garnet came to her feet and promptly came around the table, pressing her hands to Liam's broad shoulders. 'I could never see you as a burden. I love when you're here, Liam. I want you here— with me.' Again she grabbed his hand, cradling it against her. "Please stay, just for a little longer. Uncle Cid can be mad all he wants, but he's not the only one who needs you."

Liam smiled and came to his feet, looking down towards Garnet. This was exactly what he wanted,

he realized. He was relishing in the eager attention she placed over him. “Well,” He wrapped his arms around her waist and brought her in closer to him. Garnet grinned, placing her hands to his chest. “I suppose I could take a few more days off for you. You’re the Queen, after all.”

Garnet tenderly brought her hand to his cheek. “I’m glad you’ll reconsider for me.”

“I’d bring the moon down to you if I could, my dear.”

Garnet leaned forward and carefully pressed her lips to Liam. He pushed back with the intensity of excitement. After a few moments, their lips parted and Liam simply held her. “Let’s finish breakfast, love. Once you do a bit more work, we’ll go for a walk this afternoon.”

“Sounds exactly like how I want to spend my time with you,” Garnet grinned, batting her thick lashes towards him.

# Chapter Eighteen

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## Chapter Eighteen

The door to the study opened, making Zidane look up from tying a sack shut. There was Garnet, who had returned much later than Zidane anticipated. The breakfast had gone on for well over an hour, which seemed like Garnet's opposite intention when she left the room. She was smiling, however, and stopped to look over the table that was now clear. A neat stack of letters, tied together with string, now sat on the table. It was the first wave of deliveries for next week's public hearing. Garnet folded her hands behind her back and came around the table to watch as her bodyguard tied the sack off. He hauled it over his shoulder to take it to the door for the parcel delivery. He paused, though, to inspect Garnet, who seemed in much higher spirits than when she left.

"Did you have a good breakfast?" Zidane asked as he set the bag down. He turned towards Garnet and set his hands on his hips. "Mimosas?"

"Oh, no," Garnet shook her head, letting out a short huff. "Nothing like that. The world's just a

more beautiful place when you can dine in the sunshine with someone you care about.”

Zidane furrowed his brow and watched as Garnet went to the window, looking out over the cluttered buildings that made up Alexandria. She seemed so loose and carefree. It was a far stretch from how he had found her that morning. Just an hour ago, she was elbow deep in work, running off only a couple hours of sleep, and holding all her inner anguish in. Now, she seemed so free of the stress, as if the weight of the world could no longer come over her slender body. Zidane could feel his heart hammering in his chest. Just what kind of slick words could Liam possibly say in sixty minutes to have Garnet this happy? He hadn’t seen her in this kind of mood in quite some time. Certainly not since his return. Garnet had grown into a quiet, calculating, and refined young woman. Yet standing in front of him was someone with a goofy smile taking pleasure in the smaller things around her.

“Thank you for finishing sealing the envelopes, Zeke,” Garnet turned towards him. “That really helps free up my agenda today! I knew you’d have no trouble at all working through it.”

“Well, what’s next?” Zidane asked, watching Garnet carefully. She went towards her desk that was situated beneath a rather grim portrait of Queen Brahne. She pushed aside the few leather bound books she had fished out from her shelf about common laws. She lifted her agenda, tilting her head back and forth.

“I suppose it’s lunch time for you,” Garnet smiled over her shoulder.

“But you just got back from breakfast,” Zidane glanced to the grandfather clock. “And the first wave of lunch won’t even be served at the barracks for another hour and a half.”

“Then you have some free time today,” Garnet told him, crossing towards Zidane. “We will be busy tomorrow with the public hearing, anyway. You should take a few hours off and we can meet back up in the west garden. The final details will be completed for the memorial and we can plan a commemorate ceremony for this weekend.”

“What about the tax report we had to confirm today? Or the report from the headmasters of the private education department? Didn’t you say there was a school running low on funds?” Zidane furrowed his brow as Garnet shrugged from her long

green coat, revealing a dark purple dress with black frill cuffs. She simply disregarded the coat on a chaise lounge.

“That can all wait,” Garnet said and Zidane straightened his shoulders, now feeling an awful weight come over him. “As long as we respond by the end of the week, I’m sure Headmaster Tsu doesn’t mind waiting a few extra days. For the time being, I’m going for a walk.”

“Your Majesty,” Zidane grabbed her arm, stopping her just before she whizzed past him. “Are you alright? You’re acting... different. Do you just need some alone time? Did something happen with Liam?”

“You know... something did happen with Liam,” She turned to him, tilting her head back to look at him. ‘I realized something about him, Zeke. That he cares about me and that he’s here now for me. I think, after all, everything will be alright. We were going to take a walk in the garden this afternoon and talk about it.’ Zidane clenched his teeth together and released Garnet before he squeezed her arm too tight. He felt all the muscles balling up beneath his skin. “He really is magnificent and brilliant...” Garnet’s bright eyes moved to the window and

Zidane paused, catching a glimmer of a pink ring along the perimeter of her irises. “And he’s just been here all along. I think I need someone like him. To help me feel grounded. Does that make sense?”

Zidane walked a few paces, his body temperature sky rocketing. “It... sounds like you’ve found something comforting, Your Majesty.” He crossed his arms over his chest and lowered his head.

“It really is a divine feeling,” Garnet again tucked her arms behind her back and cautiously, Zidane looked over his shoulder at her. Her shoulders tilted back and forth as she cocked her head to the side. The feeling of the sunlight washing over her felt exquisite. “It reminds me of when I first fell in love with Zidane.”

Zidane cautiously ran his tongue along the front of his teeth. “Care to elaborate?”

“I suppose I loved him long before,” Garnet was smiling. It was the first time he’d seen her smile while she spoke about him. “But the moment I realized my emotions... it was right here in this very castle, on the bridge between the upper garden balcony and the private chambers. It’s where I had first met him and much later did I realize I loved him. I was going to become the Queen in the wake



of my mother's death. The coronation was directly on the horizon. He had come with our friends... Eiko, Freya, Amarant... to see me in dress as the new Queen. Zidane looked so very sad, just as I was. Our adventures were seemingly coming to an end. But the way he looked up to me on that bridge... and our eyes met... I realized he was the one right then and there. But I had to leave in the next moment. I never truly got to tell Zidane I loved him. And he never said it, either. I wonder if we both felt the same way."

Zidane's entire frame was beginning to shake and for a moment, he pressed his hands to his helmet. He didn't think he could do this a moment more. But Garnet's voice once again interrupted him and he looked to her.

"I realize now the errors of my ways, Zeke," Garnet told him. "I always get so muddled in the details, I'm never truly taking advantage of any moment. I simply let it all pass me by and then I lay awake at night wondering what I could have done differently. I have so many imaginary scenarios where I actually did something or said what I wanted... what I wish I had. I can't let that happen again. I made my mistakes with Zidane but now this is my true shot at love."

“You love him?” Zidane asked, nodding his head towards her with his somewhat stiff neck.

“I think I do,” Garnet nodded and Zidane felt his heart drop. But again, he pursed his lips when he saw that flash of pink in her eyes. He glanced around the room for a moment for anything that could possibly be reflecting on her in the afternoon light. Nothing was pink in the Alexandrian Castle, though. ‘It was the same feeling I had felt with Zidane. I looked across the table at Liam and suddenly, it hit me. I realized I really did love him.’ Garnet smiled wider now. “I’m going to meet him down in the garden. Let’s say we catch back up at two o’clock?”

“Yes, Your Majesty...” Zidane rattled as Garnet walked past him, leaving without a second thought. When the door closed, Zidane staggered into the nearest chair, pulling his helmet from his head. His brown hair flopped across his forehead, his face totally deflated. He wanted to yell and scream every curse word he knew. He wished the floor would swallow him up. He had no one to blame but himself, yet again. What was he doing? What was he thinking? Zidane carelessly threw his helmet onto the table, pressing his fists to his chin. Everything about this seemed wrong to Zidane, though. It was

like a switch had been flipped in her. That color in her eyes, it had never been there before. Even before the mass destruction and devastation of the war, the changing of the throne; Garnet had never been one to express happiness so outwardly. She was a quiet and reserved creature by nature. The Garnet who returned from breakfast was not the Garnet Zidane recognized. All the bells and sirens were going off in Zidane's mind and he scraped his helmet across the table and into his hands before he barreled out the door.

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“My soldiers, how are they doing?” Beatrix asked from the kitchen table. Steiner was fixing himself lunch at the counter. He glanced towards the general who had come to deeply fancy hot cocoa despite it being the height of the summer season. Steiner had taken on meeting with both Squad Beatrix and the Knights of Pluto. All of the soldiers were told Beatrix was ill with the flu for now. The doctor had ordered constant bed rest, plenty of fluids, and lots of soups. Rumors still cycled that desert fever was real, however. Steiner even wondered if a few of the female soldiers had a much better hunch than he anticipated. And yet no one said anything or

confronted Steiner directly. Beatrix was nearing the halfway point of her pregnancy they were both beginning to realize. Her stomach was swelling larger and larger with each day. Beatrix now opted to wearing oversize cotton tunics with tall collars. Beatrix kept her eyes cast down, listening to Steiner clang about at the counter during his break. She felt lower and lower with each passing hour. She felt like her life was flying by her and she was passive and unable to accept it at all. Her meetings with the doctor made her feel like something was wrong with her. Beatrix was inclined to believe that, too. Never in her life had she scared herself into hiding in the confines of her living quarters. The doctor seemed excited about the baby. Even with Steiner's comforting and dutiful eye over her, she could sense his growing excitement for the child. Still, though, Beatrix thought this event was sorely misplaced on her. With only months left before the baby's arrival and Beatrix's ever changing body to accommodate it, she was beginning to panic that she still didn't feel an inkling of joy about this life changing event. All she could focus on was her life as a general slipping right between her fingers.

"Everyone's doing fine," Steiner told her, drawing her from her thoughts. He seated himself

across from her with his favorite lunch; a cucumber and hummus sandwich with the crust cut off. “How are you feeling?”

Beatrix sighed, directing her eyes towards the window. “I wish you would stop asking me that.”

Steiner paused from lifting his sandwich. “I’m sorry.”

Beatrix shook her head. “No, I’m sorry. It’s been months and I guess the thought isn’t any easier to bear.”

“Well,” Steiner tried to grin lightheartedly. “I guess we *should* be a little scared another you will be running around.”

“I hope to the gods it’s another you, if anything,” Beatrix cast her eyes down to her cocoa. “Though, that won’t make it all better. I will just screw it up, no matter who it’s like.”

“Beatrix...”

“I don’t want to talk about it right now,” She said. “I still need time and I don’t know how much.”

Steiner could only nod, focusing on eating his lunch. He reviewed his morning of checking in with Squad Beatrix. The girls were not the least bit

without direction in the general's absence. Beatrix had trained them well. He only wished his men could be that fine tune. Discreetly, he looked to the side of Beatrix's face. His heart hurt for her. And he felt guilty on so many levels for putting her into this predicament. Steiner couldn't lie, though. He was excited. They had room for the child in their living quarters. Beneath all his armor, he felt like a big papa bear, but he couldn't express that to someone who had no intention of being a mama bear. Still, he held hope that perhaps things would start to shift for her. Maybe, he considered, an influx of emotions and knowing would come over Beatrix in the later stages of her pregnancy. He could only hope at least. Luckily, Garnet had been so busy, she hadn't asked where Beatrix had been. He worried about her on his shifts, knowing she was just sitting in their living quarters, staring at that belly in a lost trance. Steiner tried to swing by as much as he could, but even then, he was pretty useless in making anything better. It wasn't exactly how he had envisioned this entire ordeal playing out, but Steiner did his best to roll with the punches, be understand, and not prod too much. He simply held out hope.

The front door opened suddenly and the couple jolted at the table, looking towards the kitchen

archway with faces already displaying exasperation and looks implying rudeness. The door shut just as quick, blocking all the sunlight out. Steiner and Beatrix relaxed when Zidane came around the corner. His face was pinched tightly and he harshly slammed his helmet down onto the counter, making the knife rack jump. He looked between the Captain and General with nearly twitching eyebrows.

“I think we have a real problem here,” He said with an even voice despite his red cheeks.

“And that is?” Steiner asked.

“Something is wrong with Dagger, I just talked to her and she was acting weird,” Zidane shook his head. ‘She went to breakfast with Liam, but before that, we were in the private study together preparing for the public hearing.’ Zidane was pacing now, though the narrow kitchen only allowed a step and a half in every direction. “She was pretty tired and sluggish this morning and exasperated she had to go to this breakfast, but Liam and Garnet had apparently had an argument yesterday morning.” Zidane pursed his lips. “But when she came back just a few minutes ago, it was like an entirely different Dagger. She was humming and smiling. Her face looked bright. She was giddy! It was totally

unlike her. And... and she told me she loved Liam, just like she used to love me... and, they, uh, are on a walk together now to talk about it.”

There was a silence for a moment and Zidane watched intently as the duo processed what he had just said. Beatrix cleared her throat, tapping a finger to the table. “So, it’s weird if Her Majesty is happy to you? She’s had much longer to process everything that has happened to her. For you, this is all still fresh. Are you sure you’re not upset because you realized Her Majesty can move on eventually?”

“No, this is different,” Zidane told her intensely. “She decided to skip things on the agenda just to spend time with him! And... and she was way too bubbly. Even for a Dagger that hadn’t experienced all she had laid out for her. It was *weird*, Beatrix! And she had this pink ring in her eye. Around her iris.”

“A pink ring?” Steiner arched his eyebrows. “That sounds familiar...”

“Dig, Steiner,” Zidane practically pleaded. “What did Liam do to her?!”

“Oh, we cannot possibly jump to the assumption the Regent of Lindblum’s lead engineer has done



harm to the Queen!” Beatrix came to her feet with some effort. “Zidane, you’re acting far too rashly. It’s possible they had a very good breakfast. And Gods know the Queen could use some happiness in her life. We have that whole memorial ceremony we have to go through with because of you! That will just hurt her more.”

“Beatrix, look, I know it’s stupid,” Zidane held his hands up. “But there’s only one more thing stopping me from taking this armor off. And I need Steiner’s help to start the process.”

Steiner had been stewing about in his mind trying to recall where he had heard the description of Garnet’s eyes, but he was startled when Zidane said his name. “What are you talking about?”

“Remember when I told you about what I saw at the bar when I went out with the Knights a few weeks ago?” Zidane arched his eyebrows. “About Astrid giving propaganda speeches not in favor of Dagger? People agreed. They want her to give the throne up to them. Something bad is brewing in the allies of Alexandria.”

“Where do I come into this?” Steiner shook his head.

“You and I have to go to the bar tonight and listen to her,” Zidane told him. “You’re the Captain. You can sound the alarm for defenses against a blatant act of resistance. I need you to witness it.”

“Zidane, that would spark a revolution!” Beatrix looked to him with her intense blue eye. “Again, you’re acting rashly. I’m not completely following you. Fill in the gaps for me, would you? Who is Astrid? What does her likeness to Her Majesty have anything to do with this?”

Zidane had to take a deep breath. His heart was rattling about in his ribcage. “Astrid is apparently the product of an affair King Emet had with a woman in Lindblum at the beginning decline of the original Princess Garnet’s health. She’s only a year younger than her, making her the same age as Dagger. And if all of that is actually true...”

“Then Her Majesty holds no true bearing to the throne...” Steiner said, rather flatly.

“This is preposterous!” Beatrix gawked between both the boys. “You believe what she says?! She’s duping you, Zidane. And... she really knows it’s you?”

“Yeah, she does,” Zidane was sheepish.

“Zidane used to be romantically involved with Astrid,” Steiner told her matter-of-factly.

“Wow, Zidane, it truly does just get better and better,” Beatrix let out a long sigh. “I’m much too tired to deal with this nonsense. You’re overreacting, simple as that. Though, Steiner, I do agree it’s worth witnessing what she speaks. It’s better to be in the light than in the darkness. But you, Zidane, better not do a thing to suggest to the Queen she is being strange. Let her be happy, please. If you do love her enough to hurt her like this, then let her have the joy when it comes to her.”

Zidane pursed his lips. “Yes, Beatrix...” After a moment, she brushed past him, heading towards the living room. Zidane let out a sigh and sank into the chair Beatrix had deserted across from Steiner. ‘Something is wrong, I can feel it in my gut.’ Zidane told him with a scratchy voice. “I can’t ignore my gut, Steiner. Liam knows something and Astrid does, too.”

“The pink ring you mentioned,” Steiner pushed his half-eaten sandwich to the side and leaned in. “I recall Master Vivi describing it to me once when he brought his growing collection of magic and alchemy books to the Castle. Vivi does much more

than simple black magic now. He can makes things... stews... potions, what have you, in hopes of lengthening the Mage's lives. Perhaps it's related to what you saw."

Zidane took in a deep breath as Vivi's name washed over him. "We either have to get him here now and or we have to go to him, Steiner."

"One thing at a time," Steiner told him. "I shall observe Her Majesty. I hate to say I want to agree with Beatrix, but I do. You chose a lot of this to happen, Zidane."

"Not now, Steiner," Zidane held his head in his hands.

"I'm serious, Zidane," He said firmly. "I already am dealing with this incoming child of mine. I'm owning up to my own consequences and being honest with myself. You're *not*. But..." Steiner let out a long sigh. "It is my sworn duty to protect the throne at all costs. This cannot go unnoticed. I shall aid you."

"Thank you," Zidane breathed a sigh of relief, tilting his head down.

That cool summer evening, Alexandria seemed to crawl with the atmosphere of liveliness. Large groups of people, dressed in flashy silks and wide skirts, filled the alleys and burst out into fits of laughter and boisterous voices as they found their restaurants and bars of choice. Zidane couldn't help but feel awkward as a breeze caught his woolen dark gray vest. He glanced beside him, catching a glimpse of Steiner's dismayed look. The middle-aged man out of uniform was as bizarre as a walking fish to Zidane. It was weird to see his somewhat fair complexion and full definition of his squared jaw. His short cropped brown hair stuck close to his round head, his black dress suit accentuating his wide body. The Captain did not look the least bit pleased. His lips were held in a straight line, his bold brow falling over his eyes like heavy rainclouds. A group of girls brushed by Steiner and he pursed his lips as the duo came to stop beneath a creaky sign. When Zidane tilted his head back, he could smell the faint fragrance of rain. It seemed a nightly storm was wafting in. The design on *The Blind Fox* sign hadn't changed in years and he felt goosebumps pucker across his skin.

"You're certain this is the right place?" Steiner asked, glancing over his shoulder at the migrating

crowds of those seeking thrills and drinks. “If she’s trying to start a rumbling like you say, don’t you believe she’d hit other bars so she can appeal to a mass crowd?”

“She might,” Zidane said, looking to the captain. “But when the sun sets, this is where she wants to be. This is where all the like-minded people are, anyway.”

“And you’re sure about this?” Steiner flickered his eyes towards the side of Zidane’s stony face.

“I’m dead sure,” Zidane replied rather tensely. “I know Astrid better than she’d like to admit.”

“Well,” Steiner let out a huff as he approached the door. “Let’s just keep our heads down low, alright? We will sit somewhere near the back.”

The bar was warm and busy when the two of them entered. There were clanking of steins and the creaks of stools as all the patrons of the bar looked towards a slender woman, standing rather proudly on top of the counter. Steiner noticed she had them all very encapsulated by her words. Zidane was already tense as he cocked his head between the bobbing of men to look at Astrid. When Steiner finally managed to get her in his line of sight, he

paused, briefly, before looking to Zidane with a bewildered expression.

“That’s her?” Steiner whispered. Zidane’s lips were pressed together and he managed a robotic nod. “She... she bears much of a resemblance to Her Majesty.”

“Yeah,” Zidane said, somewhat breathless. His eyes were still trained on her as her black hair tumbled over her slender shoulder with her wide gestures. “I wasn’t screwin’ around, Steiner.”

Astrid beat her boot against the counter, making the dishes and water smudged silverware jump. “And does Her Majesty actually care for the taxes inflicted upon us?! Do you think the Queen has to open her own coin purse to share in the misery?!”

“No!” The bar resounded.

“And do you truly believe the Queen could understand the conditions we live in?! Do you think she really cares?!”

“No!”

Astrid grinned, gracefully swooping down to collect an ale from Boris’ extended arm. She walked a few paces on the counter, taking one big healthy

gulp. She scanned across the crowd that gathered before her and she couldn't help but smile wider. Deftly, Zidane ducked his head behind the guy in front of him. "Why do we subject ourselves to this?" Astrid shook her head and her thick black plait beat against the nape of her neck. "Why do we let people rule us, who do not even play by the rules of the book written by them? Why do we let Queen Garnet grow Alexandria in a way our visions do not align with? When *she* doesn't have to experience it at all, but instead, hide away in her safe little castle, envisioning the good she's done, and patting herself on the back! It is time for change, people. A new era has awaken in the midst of the world war! It is time to cast the gloom and despair aside and pull our boots up; get our hands dirty! And it is time to set forth the new rules of a new era. One that is for the people! Not those of special blood or lustrous looks! For the commoner, who has always kept this world turning, the construction moving, people clothed, and fed! We've done so much in the history of this planet and yet, we never get credit for what we do. There are not dozens of books written on the lonely farmer on the outskirts of town! Or the hungry seamstress that feeds her children first! We have always made things happen. Without us, the throne



ruler would have absolutely nothing. And nobody to unleash their woes upon. Who is with me?!”

The bar erupted into yells and men stamped their feet. Beer sloshed over the edges of cups. Steiner and Zidane very slowly turned their eyes on each other, motionless as those around them grew more and more excited by the words. “With me as your leader, the messenger of your demands and mission, we are an unstoppable force against Queen Garnet. We will open her eyes, whether she wants to see or not. And we will take back Alexandria in the name of the commoner! I, Astrid Tibbets, will give us all a face, much more lustrous than that of Her Majesty. Call her that, no more! We will rise and we will strike for what is ours. These are our streets, this is *our* kingdom!”

Zidane could hear his blood pulsating in his ears as he was bobbed about by the excited crowd. He was utterly still, watching as Astrid grinned and drank her ale. Inside, he could feel something stirring about; something that was beginning to quiver. Zidane recognized it as anger. He could sense his inner warmth taking over his entire body. His eye twitched. His hands were curling and he couldn’t do a thing to stop them. His nostrils flared as he watched Astrid kneel, speaking animatedly

with another patron of the bar. Steiner arched his eyebrows as Zidane turned, squeezing towards the door. The captain was quick to follow him, stepping out into the summer evening that was much cooler than the bar. Zidane staggered into the darkness of an alley and immediately kicked a stack of crates over.

“Dammit, Steiner,” Zidane ground his teeth together, looking over his shoulder. “It’s even worse than I thought it was. You saw how happy and excited everyone was! She has them eating out of her palms.” Zidane shook his flustered head and paced a few feet as he crossed his arms over his chest. He paused, glancing to Steiner. ‘Well!?’ Zidane held his arms out at his side. “What do you have to say?!”

Steiner ran a hand along his prickly jaw, pressing his lips together tightly. “It’s unsettling, to say the least.”

“Unsettling? Really, that’s all?” Zidane shook his head. “They want to overthrow Dagger, Steiner. It’s much more than *unsettling*.”

“I know, I suppose I’m still digesting,” Steiner told him, glancing towards the gathering storm clouds that were sailing across the band of stars in

the sky. ‘I will have to talk to Beatrix. I’ve... I’ve never dealt with this before. But I know Beatrix has. Perhaps an interview with Delta and Felicia is in order.’ Steiner tilted his lips and heaved a sigh. “I’m getting ahead of myself.”

“Go home and talk to Beatrix,” Zidane told him, raking his dark hair from his sticky forehead. “Write a letter to Vivi. We have to get him here.”

“What will you do?”

Zidane sighed, jamming his hands into his pockets. “Figure out what the hell Liam did to Dagger.”

“You really believe he did something?” Steiner tilted his head.

Overhead, a low rumble of thunder rang out and Zidane hunched his shoulders. “Yeah. I do. I’ll see you later, alright?”

“Where are you going?” Steiner furrowed his brow as Zidane turned on the heels of his scuffed boots.

“Nowhere,” Zidane said over his shoulder.

The cobblestone paths of Alexandria gleamed in the orange light of the street candles. The rain came at a light and steady pace. Zidane perched on a crate; cold, wet, and exhausted. The cool evening rain slid over his flattened hair, dribbling onto his tight cuffs. He kept his head bowed, only looking up at the click of boots to wet stone. He knew he'd regret all of this come morning but at that moment, he only pushed that all aside. That anger still stewed in his belly. It felt so hot and rapid. It was unlike any type of anger he'd felt before. He tilted his head up and felt the cool raindrops glance down his skin. Zidane only found himself muddled in his thoughts. How could all of this happen, he wondered. It only reminded him of everything he wished to forget. He truly was the mastermind of devastation and sorrow. Zidane bowed his head as his body tensed up. The scene felt so fitting to him. He was cold, on a summer night, sitting in the rain in a dingy alley. It was everything he deserved, he told himself. He closed his eyes for a moment, listening to the rain gently pelt against the cobblestone. He opened them again very quickly, however, as images of Garnet flashed by him. He could see her porcelain face, accented in the warm orange light of a campfire. He could see her calculated movement as she walked beside him amongst the twisted and knotted roots of the Iifa

Tree. He felt goosebumps come across his skin and his heart jolted as he heard the clunky creak of a door that spilled out into the damp alley.

“Good night, Boris!” Astrid called loosely over her shoulder, smothering a hiccup. She let out a content sigh as she carelessly splashed through the murky puddle, drawing her hood up over her glossy hair. Zidane scrambled silently on top of the crate and knelt down, simply observing her. Astrid stopped at the opening of the alley, fumbling beneath her cloak. Zidane watched her intently, his body quivering. Astrid deftly swiped a match to the wet stone and puffed on her cigarette with vigor. The smoke swirled around her as the rain dribbled on her ratty attire and she gazed back and forth at the empty streets. Zidane bit down on his lip, narrowing his eyes, as he observed her. He found it hard to believe this was a girl he used to once know well. At one point, he had intimately held this girl. He had kissed her soft lips. And now, he looked at her with such disdain. With a hatred that he didn’t recognize. Astrid tapped her boots to the cement and tilted her head back to feel the misty rain across her skin.

In the next moment, Zidane quietly leapt from the crates, staring at the back of the unsuspecting Astrid. His hair was plastered in a mess across his forehead,

his eyes only focused on her. He couldn't stop himself as his arms lunged forward, grabbing her cloak. Astrid let out a yelp, her cigarette tumbling onto the cold, wet ground. Zidane spun her into the wall, causing her hood to fall around her shoulders. He held her arms tightly, leaving her no wiggle room to escape. The young woman was caught sorely off-guard, with wide doe eyes. But as Zidane's face filled her vision, she managed to smile, coyly cocking her head to the side.

"Zidane..." Her voice was like velvet, the same octave Garnet's would ring out as. It made his heart rate accelerate. "Never thought I'd be pinned up against the wall by you again."

He pushed against her thin arms. "What did you do to the Queen? I know you had something to do with it."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Astrid nearly rolled her eyes. But Zidane harshly grabbed her tunic and slammed her into the wall again. "Geez, not so rough, Zidane! At least buy me dinner first."

"Stop screwing around!" Zidane's voice echoed across the vacant streets. "And don't play dumb,

Astrid. I know Delta plays with alchemy and I know *you* play with fire.”

“I’ve been here the whole time,” Astrid told him evenly. “You’re the Queen’s bodyguard, anyway. You would’ve known if I had been in the castle.”

“I know you weren’t,” He said tensely. “But I think you happen to know someone by the name of Liam Winters.”

Astrid grinned. “Is that the lovesick engineer that follows the Queen incessantly at her heels? Why, I’ve never met him. Only read what the papers have printed about him.”

“You’re lying!” Zidane roared.

“Oh? Prove it,” Astrid shook her head. “Ask the bartender. I’ve been here all day, Zidane. I have much more ground to cover and no time to play in the Queen’s garden, unlike you, *Zeke*.”

“I know you know something. Just tell me what you did to her.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Astrid told him again. They were quiet for a beat as the rain dribbled between them, their faces only inches apart. Astrid smiled even wider. ‘Oh no...!’ Astrid began

laughing, her arms bobbing beneath Zidane's tense grip. "Don't tell me he finally won his little battle! You're losing the war of the Queen's heart, aren't you?"

"Only because *some people* are riggin' the game," Zidane glared at her.

"This is so baseless," Astrid shook her head. "Let go of me before someone has you arrested. It's not a good scene; a dark, rainy night. A young woman pinned to the wall of an alley by some lunatic."

"I know you had something to do with this," Zidane sneered.

"Oh, Zidane," Astrid laughed again. "You don't have a leg to stand on. If I were you, Zidane, I wouldn't underestimate me. You're the one playing with fire." And with that, she shrugged from his grip, casting one more grin at him as she bobbed away in the steady downpour. Zidane heaved a sigh and tilted his head up into the rain, his stomach rattling and anxiety riveting through his bones.



# Chapter Nineteen

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## Chapter Nineteen

“Wowzers!” Laudo exclaimed, his curly brown hair bouncing on his head. He tossed the well-read *Alexandria Tribune* onto the cluttered coffee table. Zidane was slumped on the couch, his eyes focused on the nearby fireplace that roared warmly that summer evening. Around him, all the soldiers sat in their lounge ware of loose white cotton shirts and tan pants. They passed decanters of brandy around, crackers and cheese, but Zidane didn’t react to a thing. Beside him, Haagen reached forward, tilting the newspaper on the table. Fleeting, Zidane’s eyes met the large words that were bold and assaulting. **The Queen of Alexandria is Finally Entertaining Suitors. Sir Liam Winters of Lindblum’s Head Engineer Team Seen in the Castle.** His nostrils flared and he looked back at the fire. Haagen cast a weary glance over Zidane as Laudo again grabbed the paper, clutching the literature tightly. “I just can’t believe it! What a dramatic spin this is all taking. It’s like a love story leapt right out of the binding of a book and landed in our lives!”

“It’s not fair,” Weimar furrowed his brow as he poured himself more brandy. “You can’t compete with a guy like that. He’s squeaky clean!”

“And taller than you,” Mullenkedheim said behind a face full of bread.

“Like you even had a shot with the Queen,” Kohel nearly rolled his eyes from where he leaned with his elbow on the fireplace mantle.

“If anyone had a shot, it was Zeke,” Breireicht said, looking over the still and quiet Zidane. ‘But maybe the Queen isn’t into soldiers. We’re all seen as mindless buffoons, anyway, running around with swords. The Queen wanted someone smart, obviously. Someone confident and quick on their feet.’ Zidane gripped the arm of the leather couch. “Not to say that wasn’t you, Zeke.”

Weimar pressed his elbows to his knees, leaning his face across the table at Zidane. “Did you and the Queen really have somethin’ going on, Zeke? Did you ever get to touch her? Or see her in robe?”

Zidane cast a glance to Weimar, shaking his head. “Nothing like that. It was all business.”

“Then why are you acting like you just got dumped?!” Weimar held his arms out. “Something

was going on behind those closed doors of the private study. Spill!”

“Leave him alone,” Kohel said. “You’d feel the same way working so closely with her. You already do and you’ve never been within five feet of her.”

“So, you’re pretty sweet on her, huh?” Haagen looked towards his amber drink, giving it a swirl. “Being young and finding love sucks.”

“It’s not that,” Zidane told him, now reaching for a tumbler and pouring from the decanter. His nerves grounded against every fiber of his body. He sat back and rolled his shoulders in hopes of finding a release from the utter tightness. “He’s not right for her.”

Weimar howled with laughter, bumping shoulders against Mullenkedheim and sending crumbs down the man’s shirt. “Oh, man, you *are* in love with her! Big time!” Weimar’s eyes spun in all his triumphant giddiness. “Who are you to say that?! He’s an engineer! He will be the *co-designer* of the *Blue Rose* when it’s unveiled! He’s tall, dark, and handsome! You are fooling yourself if you don’t think that’s a historic match right there. Admit it, Zeke. You love Queen Garnet.”

Zidane thought the glass in his hand was going to explode. Weimar still snickered and sneered as he poured himself another healthy cup of brandy. Zidane looked at the fire again, watching the little flecks of embers dance away and lick up the fireplace. Weimar was right and wrong. Zeke didn't love Garnet. Zidane loved Garnet. His head throbbed over the dilemma of his identity crisis. It was hard being an entirely new person who didn't even know themselves. There was so much more to the situation they didn't know. And Zidane wondered if they even could understand; would they actually believe him? He glanced around at the soldiers surrounding him. All of their eyes were on him. He considered, briefly, if they'd even all survive should Astrid have her way and start a revolution.

"Sure, Weimar," Was all Zidane could manage to reply and he tensely drank his brandy.

"Oh, Zeke, I know just how you feel," Weimar lounged back against the couch, putting an arm along the back. "I thought I was in love with this noble lady from Treno. Always came into the teahouse I was busing at. She'd make eyes at me and I'd make eyes at her. This went on for days... until

she finally complained to my boss I was awful at refilling her chardonnay in a timely fashion.”

“Yeah, it’s exactly like that,” Zidane nodded.

“Gods, Weimar, you’re such an oaf,” Laudo sighed, laying the newspaper against his chest. “You’re the comic relief of this story, you know that, right? It’s the only purpose you serve.”

“Hey, all I’m sayin’ is if our wise friend Zeke here got sweet on the Queen, there’s a good reason why,” Weimar sat forward again. “Women like to send messages. Silent ones are their specialty. They drop all these little clues and hints and never say exactly what they mean. And what happens to us men? We guess wrong ’cause we aren’t mind readers. I wouldn’t doubt Queen Garnet was sending you some mixed messages. Maybe your hands accidentally touched at one point and she gave you this look... and in turn that gave you hope!”

“I’d shut up if I were you,” Kohel told him from beside the fireplace. “I bet General Beatrix already knows you said that. You’ll probably get your ass kicked in the morning.”

“That’s if he can even get out of bed tomorrow morning,” Mullenkedheim laughed dryly with

cheese in his mouth.

“What are you so worried about, Zeke?” Haagen asked, gently. “You spend the most time with the Queen, so undoubtedly, you care for her wellbeing at least. What is it about Sir Winters that makes you so unsettled?”

Zidane ran his thumb along the grooves of the glass tumbler. “I don’t like the way he treats her. Like she’s a porcelain doll.”

“Dude—” Weimar piped up.

“Shush,” Kohel shot towards him, his dark skin gleaming in the flickering shadows of the fire.

“We all know she’s stronger than that,” Zidane said. “It’s not up to me, anyway. Just forget about it.”

The soldiers were quiet for a beat and the cackling fire filled the room. Zidane tensely took a sip of his drink. The alcohol stung the back of his throat and with ease fell into his belly, igniting a warmth that emanated across his entire body. What did he know anymore? He like a flopping fish, forgotten on a dock. He was powerless to do anything, he thought. Ever since his return, he was only failing miserably. Why had he returned? Why

hadn't he been buried beneath the collapsing Iifa Tree with Kuja? What made him so special, Gaia thought he was worth keeping? The questions rained down on him and he felt the waves of his mind rush against him. He had no answers, no comebacks. What was he supposed to do? How could he keep Garnet safe? And would everyone be ready when the streets started rumble? Astrid wasn't bluffing. He knew when she had her heart set on something, she never lost sight or focus. She had always wanted what she couldn't have.

"We know you'll do what's best for the wellbeing of the Queen," Haagen told him. Zidane could only feel foolish to hear such words.

He stood in the next moment, grabbing the decanter that was nearly empty. "Good night." He said, loosely dangling it at his side as he retired upstairs, to his broom closet quarters.

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The milky moonlight was bright that night, but hazy, as the dense fog of the river wafted through the twisty garden. Steiner walked quickly, heading towards the far garden. Nearby, frogs croaked and the splashes of their lily pads could be heard. The

owls hooted and the cicadas warmly chirped as Steiner came upon the budding hedges with velvety roses that were dewy and drooped in the warm humid night. The garden was absolutely still. The preparations for the memorial ceremony were poised and damp. A gold ribbon surrounded a bronze placard, built into the base of a rigid but exquisite handmade stone pillar. The rocks ranged between a sandy finish and moody dark brown. In the night time light, Steiner could distinctly make out Zidane's name etched across the metal plate. Steiner paused and looked around the large circular plaza, glancing fleetingly towards Queen Brahne's grave that had been dressed with fresh tulips. After a moment, he tilted his head back, letting out a series of low coos.

Through the haze of fog, boisterously feathered wings parted through the clouds and a majestic owl with a dark brown overcoat and a white belly flecked with creamy tans came to perch on a rock near the edge of the brick. Steiner rushed towards it, unlatching a leather collar from the owl. The animals beady yellow eyes came across Steiner and it waited patiently as the captain used string to secure a parchment to the strip of leather. Hurriedly, he put it around the owl's soft neck of downy.



“To Black Mage Village. With haste.”

The owl lengthened its neck and let out a long chirrup before Steiner felt the powerful gust of his wings. He ducked as the owl took flight, taking a wide circle above the platform and sailing out into the night. The majestic bird glided across the fog with ease, leaving a trail in its wake and allowing the twinkling stars to be seen. It disappeared from sight shortly after and Steiner released a breath he didn't realize he had been holding. A croaking toad had him again surveying his dark and lonely surroundings. Queen Brahne's tall and proud granite grave was wet and gleamed in the distorted moonlight. But Steiner's eyes were drawn towards the smaller plaque, situated behind Brahne's grave, against the edge of the plaza that bordered the rippling river. The freshly planted chrysanthemums and hollies made the bronze pop out and Steiner again only found himself staring at Zidane's dewy name. What was going to happen? Steiner was so unnerved by the unpredictable future. What would his child be like? How would his and Beatrix's relationship fare through it all? Was Zidane really right? Were they going to have to fight again? So many questions and absolutely no answers. Steiner lifted his eyes towards the towering castle, spotting

Garnet's windows. They still glowed warmly. It seemed late for Garnet to be up. Steiner felt his insides constrict, however, as he recalled Zidane's panicked arrival at his quarters. And he felt a rising panic and anxiety rivet through him as he recalled the girl's words echoing through the hot and sticky bar.

After all the time that had elapsed, after everything Steiner had already endured for the sanctity of the throne and the security of the planet, would he have the energy to do it all again? Or would exhaustion and defeat finally triumph the captain? The nighttime orchestra around him suddenly flooded back in and Steiner blinked rapidly, looking towards the foggy sky again.

“Please, Master Vivi... I need you.”

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The morning of the memorial ceremony was met with an overcast sky that seemed rather fitting for the occasion. There wasn't a large gathering of people in the garden plaza, but just enough to make it intimate and meaningful. Eiko had her gleaming purple hair coiled atop her head in a tight braid. She wore a black velvet gown with light woolen gray

accents on the hem and bell sleeves. Her mother had come dressed in the finest summer apparel and Eiko thought buttercup yellow was entirely inappropriate. But she did look nice with the blossoming garden as her backdrop. Eiko wandered forlornly around the garden plaza, not paying even the smallest inkling of attention to Queen Brahne's resting spot. For her, her mind was entirely drawn to the plaque that now confirmed her greatest nightmares and biggest disappointments. It had been nearly a year and a half but the young girl couldn't quite wrap her head around the idea that Zidane was truly gone. How could he be? She fought the same inner conflicts she had just moments after her grandfather's final breath. She thought, childishly, she'd never have to grapple those feelings again since her family had died. But the impact Zidane had left on her had proved otherwise. Eiko glanced around the plaza, some loose strands of her hair falling across her forehead. Her mother and the few friends she bought talked animatedly by the stairs leading towards the water. Regent Cid was patiently walking around on his own. He had been in deep concentration over the *Blue Rose* for days. He was eager to see Liam to discuss ideas with. Freya was polishing the edges of the memorial, brushing imaginary dirt from the moody mismatched rocks. She seemed quite tense in

her movements, but overall proud of how her design had come to life for a dear old friend of wayward roads. Eiko folded her hands in front of her and paced a few more steps, her lacy flats scuffing against the finely washed monotone bricks.

The young lady of Lindblum briefly wondered where Garnet was. But she knew the Queen may have been in anguish at the thought of an event like this. Heavens knew Eiko didn't want this to happen. She was dismayed by the rather thin crowd. No Tantalus, not even Vivi. He seemed far too busy to travel at times. Quina, however, was present, working at a portable stew pot to serve coffee and banana bread to the few meager guests. Steiner and Beatrix had yet to appear, but they were quite busy running operations, Eiko reminded herself. She was not expecting, however, the bright red headed man to enter the plaza. Eiko blinked quickly, casting her eyes up at the tall and stoic figure of Amarant, who had dressed in black. Eiko took a few steps towards him as he pensively scanned the area.

“Amarant, you're here!” She couldn't help but exclaim.

His face was as stony as it always had been, but his eyes fell across the young girl in a different way.

“It’s only polite, isn’t it?”

“Yeah...” Eiko shook her head. “I... I just haven’t seen you in awhile. Where have you been?”

“Just gettin’ by,” Amarant shrugged, glancing around the plaza. ‘So this is really it, huh?’ He looked down at the small girl. “He’s gone?”

“I don’t know,” Eiko shrugged meekly, looking around. “That’s what everyone is saying.”

“You’re too young to recognize death,” Amarant told her, heading towards where Freya stood, admiring and admonishing the dedication. Eiko was quick on his heels, though, her dress flaring behind her fast movement.

“That’s not fair!” Eiko said with a pouty face as she came to walk beside Amarant’s elbow. “You’ve been who knows where, while *I* have been here supporting our friends since the entire ordeal!”

“... We all have to do things on our own terms.”

Eiko looked to him with electric blue eyes. “What has been so important to you?”

“A lot of things,” He replied with his even, husky voice.

“Oh, like what?!”

“Greetings, Amarant,” Freya looked over her shoulder as she pulled a handkerchief from the plaque. “I’m glad you could be here with us today.”

“A pleasure,” Amarant said, casting a side eye at the dismayed Lady Eiko. “Is this everyone?”

“I’m afraid so,” Freya nodded as she tenderly folded her handkerchief. “Dagger should be along shortly, as well as Steiner and Beatrix. Then we can start.”

“Seems a little light for a guy who didn’t shy away from anyone,” Amarant crossed his arms over his chest and Eiko let out an annoyed sigh from beside him. “I figured the whole town would be here.”

“Dagger requested something small,” Freya told him, checking over the flowers once more. She glanced fleetingly at the sky, wondering if the clouds would open up during the event. “She thought it seemed fitting.”

“There she is!” Eiko’s eyes lit up and she pointed across the plaza as she saw Dagger emerge from the garden. She was dressed in an olive green gown with gold embroideries that flourished the bodice. The

skirt was a simple a-line, following Dagger's thin body. Her black hair had been braided into a fishtail, resting on her shoulder. Her arm was linked with Liam, who was stroking her fingers that rest on his arm. Liam had been speaking lowly to her, the buttons of his engineering coat glimmering in the rather colorless afternoon. Eiko was surprised to see Garnet laugh and smile. She knew, however, her mother was on cloud nine upon seeing Garnet and Liam bond. Eiko was quick to dart across the plaza. "Dagger!"

"Good afternoon, Eiko," Garnet said with a clear and melodious voice. "I'm glad you could join us this afternoon."

"Oh, come on, you know I wouldn't miss this for the world," Eiko shook her head. She paused and looked to Liam, whose face glowed with a giddiness. "Sir Liam, I didn't expect to find you here, too."

"I've been..." He paused for a moment and flashed Garnet a pearly smile, gingerly kissing the back of her hand. "*Visiting* Garnet this week." Garnet laughed coyly.

Eiko slowly furrowed her brow, watching as the couple grinned and bobbed against each other.

“Dagger, can I talk to you?”

“I must go say hi to my mother, anyway,” Liam said. He pressed his lips to Garnet’s cheeks before brushing by. Eiko stared after him with intense blue eyes before she turned to Garnet, who, surprisingly, had rosy cheeks as she watched Liam go.

“Just what the heck is going on?” Eiko pressed her hands to her lips. “You showed up to Zidane’s memorial with a *boy of interest*? I thought you didn’t even like Liam!”

“Oh, Eiko,” Garnet smiled, shaking her head. ‘You’ll find as you get older, things are not so cut and dry. People can change, things can change. It’s all part of the beauty of time.’ Eiko could only stare at Garnet as she shifted her attention to watching Liam, who patiently and politely shook and kissed all of Lady Hilda and his mother’s entourages hands. Eiko kept her eyes on Garnet, pensively scanning her face and watching her body language. She seemed unusually loose for how stressed she had been in recent weeks. A light drizzle was beginning to come across everyone’s skin and Garnet glanced up. “We should start the ceremony. We wouldn’t want anyone catching a cold.”

“But Steiner and Beatrix,” Eiko told her.



“Oh, yes,” Garnet nodded. “Perhaps you could go get them real quick, Eiko? Me and Liam will organize here.”

“I’ll go check their quarters,” Eiko said, taking a few paces away. “Dagger, don’t start without me.”

Garnet turned towards her and grinned. Eiko paused, her dress sticking to her as it grew wet. She swore she saw something in Garnet’s eyes. But perhaps it was only the garden reflecting off her irises. “I won’t, Eiko.” The young lady was slow to get her feet moving again as she went off in search through the twisty garden.

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“Watch her closely,” Zidane told Steiner and Beatrix as he met them on their walk. Beatrix had dressed in a large black peacoat that effectively swallowed her entire body. Steiner seemed dismayed as he felt the light mist come down. His armor had only just been polished a few days ago. Zidane’s dark hair gleamed on his head as he held his helmet beneath his arm. “Seriously, look at her eyes. It’s bizarre. And watch how she interacts with Liam.”

Beatrix jammed her hands into her coat pockets, holding the front closed tightly. “I’m expecting

nothing more than a heartbroken woman.” She glanced to Zidane. “When is the last time you slept, Zidane? I’m starting to think you’re overworking yourself.”

“I’m being serious, Beatrix,” Zidane huffed, furrowing his brow. “I know Dagger too well. She’s not acting right.”

“I’ve known Her Majesty since she was just a young child,” Beatrix told him. “I’ll be the judge of strange behavior.”

“That’s all I’m asking,” Zidane shook his head. “Just keep an eye on her.”

In the next moment, before anybody could speak, they heard the sound of hurried footsteps to the gray brick of the garden. Zidane nearly dropped his helmet as he fumbled to put it on straight over his face. He properly secured it, just in time to see Lady Eiko appear, looking both ways. When she laid eyes on the General and Captain, she hurried forward, holding her skirt up. “There you are! We’re about to start the memorial. Dagger sent me to find you two.”

Zidane took that moment to study the young girl. It was amazing just how much taller she’d grown in one year. She had barely been elbow height when he

met her. Now, she was shooting up rapidly, like a weed, to nearly his shoulder. She was going to be a slender and lanky young lady. Eiko was slowly but surely losing the childish rosy cheeks and her cheekbones were becoming more pronounced, her lips filling out. She still carried her childlike energy, however, that was boundless in her leaps and jumps as she raced around the garden. She was more mindful of her posture, though, no longer slumping her shoulders. It was amazing what time could do, was all Zidane could think about.

“We’re heading that way,” Beatrix told her. “We should hurry, though, before the weather gets any worse.”

Eiko only cast a fleeting glance over Zidane before nodding. “Let’s go. Dagger’s waiting!” And with that, she took off without even waiting for a word. Zidane watched as she bounded away and disappeared yet again. He pursed his lips and held a sigh in as Steiner looked to him.

“We’ll see you in a bit.” And tensely, Zidane watched them go as well, to celebrate a life that was never physically lost, but rather, mentally.

“... I thank you all for being here today,” Garnet said from behind a dark mahogany podium. The small crowd stood together silently, their hands clasped and their eyes on the Queen. The light drizzle did not phase a soul. Several, in fact, found it very suiting. A silent, somewhat solemn rain, as if Gaia knew why they were gathered. Eiko thought the entire time, she’d only be staring at Zidane’s gleaming, engraved name, but instead, she found herself intensely focused on Garnet. The way she languidly moved and pressed her lips together. Eiko couldn’t help but twist her hands into fists. “Today, we gather to celebrate a life that we must sadly declare as extinguished. We held onto hope for quite some time. And it’s with a heavy heart...” Garnet paused momentarily, touching her temple. A rush of blood came over her and died away just as quick. “Excuse me...” She cleared her throat as Liam watched her somewhat earnestly from the edge of the gathered crowd. Eiko felt her eyes narrowing. At the very back of the crowd, Steiner and Beatrix stood shoulder to shoulder as the rain pelted against the metal of Steiner’s armor and the slick cotton of Beatrix’s coat. And just behind them, a quiet and elusive Zidane watched Garnet longingly, pressed into the damp velvety leaves. “It is with a heavy heart and so much regret that I stand before you now

and dedicate this plaque and beautiful garden, arranged by the selfless Lady Freya of Burmecia, to Zidane Tribal; the hero of prevailing peace.” Garnet was somewhat lightheaded as she looked to the bronze plaque that glistened in the steady humid summer rain. A pulse ran against her temple and she tore her eyes away. Zidane watched her very intently until movement in the corner of his eyes drew his attention away.

Just beyond another tall hedge, Delta was watching with keen interest. He pursed his lips, casting one fleeting glance at the ceremony. He darted across the walk path, grabbing Delta’s shoulder and dragging her back. She was caught off-guard and let out a yelp, her thick dark braids beating wildly against her arms. Her chocolate eyes pierced Zidane. If looks could kill, the young man considered he’d be on the ground that moment. He grabbed her arm tightly, pressing her silver bracer into her skin. “Pretty funny to find you snooping at a moment like this,” Zidane told her stiffly.

“The same could be said of you,” Delta shot back, straightening her shoulders. “Who attends their own memorial service?”

“You did something to the Queen,” Zidane said, backing her against the bush. “Now you’re here to check on your work.”

“Like I wanted to miss your memorial service,” Delta grinned. “I always had wanted to see a crowd send you off.”

“Quit being snide,” Zidane ground his teeth together. “This is serious, Delta. Whatever you and the Trixies are cooking up, you better think twice. I think you’re all in a little over your head. This is going to fail. *Miserably*. And who knows, the next crowd might be sendin’ you or one of your sister’s off.”

“You don’t know shit, Zidane,” Delta sneered. ‘You’re just bluffing because you don’t know what’s going to happen. You’re scared and I can see that. But don’t worry.’ Fluidly, she came up to caress Zidane’s cheek. He cringed away from it. “Pretty soon, you’ll have nothing to worry about anymore. There’s nothing you can do about it, either, Zidane. You don’t know numbers. You don’t know tactics. Hell, you don’t even know where or how it will begin. From which direction. With who and why. You don’t have a leg to stand on, Zidane.”

“The Alexandria Castle is onto you,” Zidane warned her. “They know something is going on. If you think any of your people are going to be able to just waltz through the gates, you’re dead wrong, Delta.”

“Gods, you’re so dense,” Delta shook from his arm and walked a few paces, her silver body armor gleaming in the rain. “That’s why I’m here, just like you. I’m getting intel. I’m going under the radar. I’m here to understand. Felicia walks those halls and I patrol these gardens. Do you really think we’re scared of General One-Eyed and Captain Nerves? And each and every one of these little soldiers have a weak spot— both in their mind and in the flawed armor they are equipped with. There’s thirty-two soldiers in total to protect this castle. Do you think it was going to be just the three of us knocking on your door?”

“Just tell me what you did to the Queen,” Zidane took a step towards her and instinctively, her hand went to the hilt of her sword. “How does drugging the Queen play a part in your mutiny!?”

“I know you’re an idiot, but you have the street smarts,” Delta said, looking to him with stony eyes.

“If I tell you what it is, you’ll discover something to reverse it.”

“I’ll find out what it is.”

“Well then, this conversation is over,” Delta began to walk away, her boots clicking to the wet cobblestone. “It was a lovely ceremony, by the way.”

Zidane was silent and tense, his helmet dangling in his hand. The rain had picked up and thunked loudly against his head, almost deafening him. Delta was right. Zidane didn’t know what was going to happen. He felt his nerves grinding up against his skin and he was stiff as he turned to peer around the hedge. Garnet was gone. A small crowd remained. Eiko knelt before the plaque, uncaring of the rain soaking her. Her head was tilted, her lips just barely moving as she pressed her clasped hands to her forehead. Zidane felt his heart droop in his heart and he pursed his lips together, furrowing his brow.

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The bar was warm and quiet when Delta and Felicia arrived, dress in cotton tunics and form fitting pants. As usual, they found Astrid lounging on the ratty couch, drinking ale after ale and



scribbling in a small pocket notebook. When she spied her sisters, she scrambled upright, sticking her brown and white flecked plume between the pages. Boris was quick to serve the girls as they seated themselves, glancing around the bar. The workday hadn't ended yet. Only the vagrants of the streets had crawled in with their meager gil found in drainage holes and alleyways. Astrid seemed rather eager and in high spirits that late afternoon.

“Hello, you two,” Astrid greeted as they settled into their chairs. “I hope you have news from ground zero.”

“Yeah...” Delta nodded, reaching for her drink. “The potion seems to be working, but...”

“But?”

“She needs to drink more.”

“What? Why?” Astrid furrowed her brow, pausing from her ale. “You told me it would last a lifetime.”

“It does, under normal pretenses,” Delta told her, sighing and casting a weary glance around. “It works perfectly fine when giving it to the waitress at your favorite diner. Queen Garnet is under great despair and mourning. When she spoke about

Zidane at the memorial, I saw her pause. For a moment, it broke, but it ultimately held up. Another drink of it will help suppress her grief with extreme adoration for Liam.”

“Hmph, not so easily brainwashed, huh?” Astrid fell against the back of the couch, blowing a dark framer from her face. “Felicia, any news from inside?”

“There’s a cheese cellar on the north side of the kitchen,” She said, her long red hair falling over her shoulder. “It has an outside exit that’s overlooked and never locked. A very exacting way in. The second floor balcony on the west side has a garden trellis that can support both me and Delta at the same time. General Beatrix is with child and, therefore, not supervising.”

“Well that’s all good news,” Astrid nodded, drinking her golden ale. “Delta, get in contact with Liam. Have him meet me here.”

“Yes, Astrid.”

“How does everything go on your side?” Felicia asked, looking to the youngest sister.

“It gets better and better every evening,” Astrid grinned. “We have over one hundred and twenty

people who want a change. And none of them are afraid to work for it.”

“And when do the gears start to churn?” Delta tilted her head. “Zidane’s onto me, Astrid. We can’t delay too much longer. He’ll start putting the pieces together.”

The mention of Zidane caused her heartbeat to stutter, which she found wildly annoying. She kept reminding herself she didn’t care about him. But she supposed she still did. She was, at the very least, keenly interested in him. For a moment, she remembered the necklace in her pocket. “He won’t have the time. We wait for the first cold night of fall, just a few more weeks, that’s all.”

“Why then?” Delta pursed her lips. “That’s still another harvest moon away.”

Astrid sat forward, pressing her elbows to her knees. “I know I can net more people into our cause. I want a revolution of a grand scale. One that will be the first page of every history book that’s to be written. We will change all of them as we forever know it. Besides, I have one more plan up my sleeve.”

“And that is?”

Astrid seemed excited and she smiled widely. “We’ve accumulated a fine number of street-dwellers; those with no homes. They sleep on the cobblestone, they eat from the bins. And they’re the ones we use first.”

“They’re your pawns,” Delta crossed her arms over her chest and bobbed her knee. “But what’s so strategic about them?”

“Well, in the days leading up to the attack, it would be rather unsuspecting if a few vagrants wandered onto the castle grounds and got a little belligerent about not wanting to leave,” Astrid looked between her sister’s. “An effort that will require multiple soldiers to help corral the situation. And they will never be aware that the street-dwellers are carrying the mumps and the flu.”

“Biological warfare?” Astrid lifted her eyebrows. “Quite a way to start.”

“With hopefully a large amount of ill and infected soldiers, it will make it easier to penetrate and overrun the castle,” Astrid nodded.

“What about me and Felicia?” Delta furrowed her brow. “We could get infected, too.”

“Oh, you’ll be off the team by the time this happens,” Astrid passively waved her hand. “At that point, we will only be hours away from beginning what we’ve worked so hard to build. We’ll have much more important things to tend to. We’ll have all our intel by then.”

“Well,” Felicia looked between her sisters before she raised her stein. “Here’s to the first frost of autumn.”

“Here, here!” Astrid howled loudly, clanking their drinks together with vigor.

# Chapter Twenty

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## Chapter Twenty

The knocking on Zidane's small private broom closet came well before sunlight. He lifted his groggy head and blinked rapidly, noticing the moon was still in the sky. As he became oriented, his heart kick-started and he staggered from bed, as if Astrid's plans were unfurling at that very moment. Zidane hit his knee into the meager wash basin and he cursed under his breath, blindly grabbing his sword as top priority. He flung the door open to find Steiner there, with a face contorted in pain.

"What's going on?!" Zidane was nearly breathless, glancing up and down the vacant and dark hallway. "Are we under attack!?"

"No..." Steiner's voice was pinched. Slowly, Zidane lowered his sword, letting it fall back against the wall.

"What's happened, Steiner?" Zidane's voice was still husky with sleep as he furrowed his brow. He heard crinkling and lowered his head to see Steiner's hands nearly crumpling a letter. Zidane's eyes

searched the wordless captain's face. "Well, what is it?!" He was beginning to panic again.

"It's Master Vivi..." Steiner whispered. "He's dying, Zidane."

Zidane was stunned into silence. He opened and closed his mouth many times, raking his hands through his hair. "What are you talking about? Says who?! You told me Vivi has been studying the longevity of their lives."

"It seems his life's passion is catching up with him," Steiner was nearly white as a ghost. "I sent a letter to him, asking him for help a few days ago. I received this back..." His voice nearly faltered as he untwisted the parchment in his hands. "From a Mr. 209... who said Vivi is weak and exhibiting all the signs of stopping. They don't know how much longer until the final moment..."

"No..." Zidane shook his head, feeling the pressure of tears well up against his eyes. 'No, Steiner, they're wrong!' He didn't care if he woke anybody up. "Vivi would never give up like that."

"It was only a matter of time..." Steiner said, somewhat disassociated. Zidane pressed his lips together tightly as the first of his hot tears streaked

his cheeks. Even Steiner could feel all of his emotions rising up in him, burning passionately and painfully. “I must go to him.”

“I’m going, too,” Zidane said with a tight throat, rubbing sorely at his cheeks to rid himself of tears. “I have to see him one last time, Steiner. I have to let him see *me*.”

“What if Her Majesty wants to pay her final respects, too?”

“She doesn’t need more grief, Steiner,” Zidane said, lighting a match and bringing his one waxy candle to life. Hurriedly, he opened the cabinets and pulled out a fresh shirt and a black button up. He stuffed them into a bag, tossing his sword across the bed. ‘Besides, we have to look at Vivi’s collection. There has to be some answer to help reverse whatever has happened to Dagger. The condition she is in now is no way to see Vivi off.’ Steiner firmly pressed his hands together and focused on the candle. “We don’t have a lot of time, Steiner.”

“I cannot believe it...” Steiner said, watching the flame. “I always knew I’d have to prepare for this day but I had always just hoped...”



“Steiner,” Zidane looked up as he jerked the zipper closed on his bag. “Not now. We have to focus. Is Eliahna awake? She can navigate the dart-ship Regent Cid gave us.”

“Beatrix is rousing her,” The captain’s voice was so hollow.

Zidane unhooked his helmet from the wall, holding it firmly beneath his arm. “Let’s go. We can be there by early morning if we leave now.” Steiner, however, didn’t quite budge. Zidane was slow to pull his bag onto his shoulder. Steiner wasn’t reacting to anything. Zidane charged forward, giving him a curt jerk to his shoulder. “Hey! You with me?”

“Yes,” It was Steiner’s turn for the tears to surface and he pursed his lips tightly, very dismayed that he was blubbering in front of Zidane. “I’m... I’m with you.”

“Steiner...” Zidane’s bag sagged off his shoulder and he found it hard to contain his emotions in that moment. For the young man, it was such a blood rush through his skull. Never had he imagined himself here. For all the moments he had shared with the serious man, the hard truths they had faced together, never had Zidane anticipated a scene like this; cramped together in a small soldier’s bunk with

tears in their eyes. They stared rather tensely at each other with their glossy eyes. Pensively, Zidane licked his lips. ‘Come on!’ His voice was so scratchy. “We can’t be like this, Rusty. We can’t show up to Black Mage Village weepin’ our guts out. Come on..!” Zidane took a deep, hard breath. “This isn’t how Vivi wants to see us...”

Steiner gripped the end of Zidane’s bed frame and looked away, trying to blink the tears into submission. “It’s not fair, Zidane. Someone like Vivi should never face something like this.”

““Something like this’...?” Zidane was slow to shake his head. “Steiner, you know as well as I do that everything that lives and breaths and thinks has to die eventually. This isn’t some fairytale. No one gets out alive.”

“But it’s just not *fair*,” Steiner furrowed his brow. “A soul and being as innocent as Vivi deserves to transcend the ugliness, the true awfulness of a life and world like this.”

Zidane kept his hand firmly pressed into Steiner’s shoulder, his face rock hard as he watched Steiner’s tears skid down his cheeks. “Maybe that’s why it’s his time, Steiner,” Zidane’s voice nearly wavered. ‘A world that’s this ugly and awful doesn’t *deserve*

someone like Vivi.’ The two eyes lingered on each other. “You can do this, Steiner. We’ll get through it. Like we always do. Remember?”

“It was hard enough when I thought you were dead.”

“I know, it’ll be ten times harder ’cause you don’t even like me,” Zidane said. He managed to squeeze the smallest, saddest smile from the captain. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

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The summer warmth was showing the slow waning into autumn. The rays no longer pierced and kissed the skin. Instead, it gently met each being and clouds were becoming more present. It wouldn’t be long before the trees began to glow yellow and red, slowly stripping their branches in anticipation of cool, dry air. Garnet found herself sitting at the window of her private study, watching the sky pass her by. Below, the sprawling garden still burst and gleamed with all kinds of sweet pastels and moody petals. The young woman felt like a jittery mess. And her mind was absolutely scattered. Garnet was having a hard time discerning what was wrong with her. Something felt... off. But perhaps the feeling of

happiness or comfort had simply become foreign to her. In her lap, her hands nervously twisted together. She had a pile of work to sort through behind her, yet she felt no motivation. No true desire. And that was unnerving. The past few days could only be recalled as blurs. Garnet felt passive to all of it. In the moments she was alone, her mind skipped and prodded and it was tiring to keep up with. Liam occupied many of her thoughts. And every time Zidane did, too, she felt a headache come on, as if her body was begging her to shut it all down. She held in a sigh, pensively looking around the quiet room. The dark portraits loomed over her with their ever watchful eyes. Perhaps it was time to redecorate.

The door flew open, startling her, however. In came Liam, who seemed to have something on his mind. But he still offered a wide grin and, naturally, had a tray of tea and thumbprint jam cookies in hand. No matter where Liam's mind was, it always seemed to find itself back to a good snack. He pushed aside some of Garnet's impending work to make room for the tray, promptly pouring Garnet a cup and bringing it to her. "Sweetheart, how are you feeling?" He asked as she accepted the cup. Garnet let the steam lick up her neck and chin. Goosebumps

puckered across her skin. Liam watched her cautiously as he poured his own cup. ‘I’ve been worried about you since the ceremony. It’s no good to bottle things up, Garnet.’ He eased himself down onto a nearby ottoman. Behind him, the waning summer sun drenched his shoulders and burst through his dark hair. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“So sweet, as usual, to ask,” Garnet said, reaching forward and giving his knee a squeeze. Her touch alone made him tingle. Her smile did so much more. She looked almost like a porcelain doll with her round olive face in the summer sun. Her dark hair fell down her shoulder in silky smooth waves. Just a small touch of gray made her seem so mature, so absolutely beautiful. Her full lips, poised in almost a regretful smile, and her round dark eyes with their thick, full lashes. Garnet truly was a work of art, Liam decided. She sighed, cradling her tea close. ‘I’m no stranger to death, however. My own mother passed away in my arms... I suppose it just hurt that it was... Zidane.’ For a moment, Liam saw a flash of pink come across her eyes and she pressed her fingers to her temple. “I suppose it’s hard to explain. It’s rather complicated.” Liam watched her tensely. He hadn’t anticipated the affect Zidane

could have on her. His fingers tightened around his saucer. How could it be, after so much time and drinking a potion, that Zidane was still in the forefront of her mind? Wasn't his bronze plaque, his absence, enough proof to her that it was time to move on? He looked over her, though, as her tea steamed in her lap, and her confused dark eyes looked to the bright afternoon beyond the gold pane windows.

"Sweetheart," Liam did his best to smile and Garnet looked to him. "I'd like to treat you to dinner. Perhaps even dinner in Lindblum. We could have it on the deck of an airship as it careens us around the beautiful City of Industry. The finest wine, the best cheese, the works. Anything to make you happy, dear."

"I'm so lucky to have you," She tilted her head and her shimmering long black hair fell over her shoulder. Garnet's porcelain cheeks were warm and pink. It made Liam warm up in his cashmere vest. "You do so much for me to ensure I'm happy, even when I'm muddled here in my emotions for my dearly departed friend..." The flash pink came across her eyes again and Liam watched as her smile somewhat floundered and she again touched her

head. “Perhaps when I’m feeling better, Liam. I think right now... everything is just... fresh.”

There was a curt knock on the door before it opened, revealing a dark skinned girl with braids falling over her shoulder. Delta’s eyes flickered to the poised Garnet before she held a rolled parchment up in her hands. “Sir Liam, a letter for you.”

“Oh, probably just my mother asking when I’m coming home,” Liam raked his dark hair from his face and stood, adjusting his vest. As he approached to grab the letter, he noticed the soldiers very knowing eyes. He furrowed his brow, slowly looking over the bland parcel string keeping the parchment together. His mother would never send something lacking so much character. Delta nodded to him before she closed the door behind her. Liam paced slowly as he undid the letter to find slanted writing that was partly curly.

*Meet me at the Blind Fox. It’s important.*

“I imagine your mother and Uncle Cid miss you,” Garnet said, setting her tea on her desk and wandering towards the window. “I love your company, but perhaps it is time to go home.”

“Not yet, my love,” Liam shook his head, approaching her from behind. Gently, he ran his hands along her shoulders, pressing his chin to her sweet smelling hair. Garnet’s eyes gazed ahead at the sprawling garden as she felt his soft hands touch her. She felt something in her chest for a slight moment and she stiffened. “I still have some business here in Alexandria.”

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Zidane had never felt so anxious in his life, he was certain. He had paced the deck for hours before the wind grew chilly on his ears. He shuffled down the narrow stairs and was uncaring of his shoulders brushing the corridor walls. He felt absolutely deflated. Before, when only Kuja was their sworn enemy, Zidane hadn’t felt so fearful. Not when he had a team of friends to stand beside him with their chests puffed out and their hearts on their sleeves. Now he didn’t know what he was heading into, but it only brought doom to the pit of his stomach. Part of Zidane still dearly wanted to believe Steiner was wrong or simply over analyzing the message he received. Perhaps Vivi was only under the weather and dictated the letter. Or maybe Vivi was busy. Zidane pursed his lips together as he came to the



spacious mess hall that overlooked the front of the ship. The slanted bow was nothing but windows and far below, the ocean glistened and tossed about, back and forth, like all of Zidane's internal conflicts. Steiner was sat at a table by himself, his head in his hands. When he heard Zidane's boots scuff against the planks, he lifted his face to reveal dry, sore looking red eyes.

"Hey..." Zidane said, slinking onto a bench across from Steiner. He looked towards the clouds that parted in their presence. It was shaping up to be a pleasant, golden morning. "How's it going?" Zidane asked, looking to the captain.

"I only wish this ship went faster," Steiner said. His eyes gazed out the windows but it was impossible to tell where in the ocean they were. Half way to the Outer Continent? Who knew. The small sporadic lonely islands did nothing to assuage his fears or indicate where he was. "What if it's too late when we get there, Zidane?"

"You can't think like that," Zidane shook his head, pressing his lips together. He straddled the bench, running his knuckles along the grooves. "We'll be there in time, Steiner. And we'll talk to him. We'll share all those stupid memories we made

together...” He paused and furrowed his brow, watching misty clouds disappear beneath them. He opened his mouth briefly before he changed his mind, left to stare at the wavy wood he sat on.

“What?” Steiner asked. Zidane looked to him tensely, his eyebrows knitted together and his eyes pulsating with a desire to grow wet. Zidane only shook his head. “Zidane, we’re in this together, alright? Throw your manhood aside and let’s talk about death. This is *Vivi*.”

Zidane heaved a sigh and hunched his shoulders, looking to the ocean below. “I just wish... I could take Vivi’s place. This is gonna be hard on everyone when they find out, Steiner. Vivi was the glue of this team. Without him, I don’t think a lot of us would have made it... not to mention he stopped any violence between us...” Steiner smirked for a fleeting moment knowingly. “In a way, Vivi was the leader of this whole thing, whether he wants to take credit for it or not. I don’t think I’d be here without Vivi... but I’d give any chance to not be so he could, y’know?”

“I think we all feel the same way,” Steiner told him, rather solemnly.

“Like you said, though,” Zidane shrugged meekly. “It’s not fair. Everyone thinks I’m dead, but I’m not. It’s just piling on with Vivi.”

Steiner looked towards the windows. “You had a choice, Zidane. Vivi does not.”

Zidane ground his teeth together, looking across the table. “You think this is the decision I wanted to make? You didn’t know me when I woke up, Steiner. I didn’t even know myself.”

“I’m not trying to pick a fight with you...” Steiner huffed, casting his eyes down. Fatigue was rearing an ugly head on the man. “Sometimes it’s hard, though, holding in this secret. I’ve seen Master Vivi, Freya, Eiko, Amarant... they’re all still torn up about you, whether they want to admit it or not. And I have to refrain from uttering a peep.”

“And I’m sorry,” Zidane nodded curtly. “I didn’t even want you to know. You’re the one who insisted on me taking my helmet off!”

Steiner pursed his lips tightly. “You think Her Majesty is acting weird... well, maybe it’s time to stop being Zeke for her and start being Zidane if you’re so worried.”

“It’s not so easy!” Zidane snapped before he uttered a sigh, coming to his feet. Tensely, he crossed his arms over his chest, approaching the horizon that was continually sucked under them. ‘I get it, Steiner... I’ve made a mess of everything. But I haven’t felt right for a long time. Some times, I feel okay. And some times it happens when I’m tucked underneath a shield of armor. I’m trying, Steiner. I really am. But I just... I can’t look all of you in the eye, after everything you did for me, and feel right about any of it. Some days are better than others. But now with Astrid and everything of my past just biting me in the ass, I’m... I can’t do it right now, alright?’ Steiner pressed his chin to his hands, searching endlessly in front of him. Zidane ran his tongue along his front teeth, looking to the captain. “Say something, please. What’s on your mind?”

Steiner seemed wordless for a moment before his tired, searing eyes met Zidane’s. “I fear my child is not welcome.”

Zidane’s body softened for a minute and he staggered to the table, pressing his palms to it. “How could you say that, Steiner?”

His eyes grew wet for several reasons, but he looked to Zidane, quivering in his own armor. “It’s been five months, Zidane, and she still hasn’t accepted it. Her belly has bulged, there is something in there that we somehow created and yet...” He blinked rapidly, turning his face away from Zidane. “I don’t know if we can do this.”

“Oh, come on, you’re Captain Steiner and she’s General Beatrix!” Zidane shook his head. “You’re telling me a tiny baby is going to take you both down? Beatrix has single handedly laid forty-two men on the ground by herself. Even if she gave birth to triplets, it’d be a hard fought match to bring you two down.”

Steiner only lowered his eyes as a few lone tears began to streak his cheeks. Zidane sighed and sunk back down onto the bench. He wanted off this emotional roller coaster. “She doesn’t want the child, Zidane. I did this to her...”

“Hey, it takes two to make a baby,” Zidane told him.

“But I cannot help but think I did this to her. I’ve caused all of this... She’s unhappy, Zidane. She thinks her entire life is over and do you have any idea how difficult that is? Waking up every morning

and seeing her sad face? Never running into her on our routes anymore... no more stealing kisses in secrecy... it's all over, Zidane. I think it will be the end of us once the baby is born."

"Come on... you know that's not true," The young man furrowed his brow. "I think when Beatrix holds it for the first time, it might change everything. Besides, can't say I blame her... she's gotta push a baby that'll have your big head on it out. That's gotta take a lot of mental preparation."

An airy laugh escaped Steiner's throat and he sniffled, shaking his head. "I don't know how you always manage to crack a joke when the scene is so solemn."

Zidane shrugged lightheartedly. "It's probably brain damage, always trying to make things jolly when everything is absolute shit..." Zidane sighed, pressing his elbows to the table. "I don't know what we're walking in on once we get to Black Mage Village... but I hope it scares the Zeke Tisdoll right out of me."

"Me too," Steiner said, smiling meekly.

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Liam nervously fiddled with the buttons on his vest as he pressed through the streets. His airship coat jingled as he walked, glancing to the marketeers who closed their booths and the workers who stretched upwards after a long day of work hunched over. Liam ran his tongue along his teeth as the creaky sign for the *Blind Fox* appeared over the bobbing heads. It was still early enough in the afternoon that everyone bustled past with errands on their mind and the last of their chores before the sun set and the inky dark sky stretched over the city. Liam looked up and down the street, smoke wafting past from the food booths and men throwing coins to young boys for newspapers. Fleeting, the airship engineer caught the front of the paper and he paused just short from pushing the door open. He fished through the pockets of his dark pleated pants and took an *Alexandria Tribune* from a boy with pointy ears who grinned excitedly when he saw the coin.

**Lindblum and Alexandria: Shared Alliance on the Horizon?** Was printed boldly on the front. Liam's boots clicked to the cobblestone as he wandered a few paces, the hurried crowd dividing around him. *Rapidly approaching is the four year anniversary since King Emet's death. A solemn scene it was that late autumn day when news broke*

over the city that their fatherly and doting King had passed away peacefully in his sleep after a long fought battle of illness. He was survived by the heart-broken Queen Brahne and their daughter, Princess Garnet. King Emet and Regent Cid Fabool of Lindblum were a close duo, often reported to visit small bars and bistros together in the hearts of their kingdoms, gracing and speaking with their subjects while sporting a brotherly-friendship. It has been no secret of Lindblum and Alexandria's tight comradeship that exudes from the relationship the rulers shared. There has always been the question of how Lindblum and Alexandria could secure a formal and recognized alliance when Regent Cid and Lady Hilda had no viable male heirs to help inherit the thriving artisan city of Alexandria. Long reported, citizens of Alexandria have always wanted the technological innovations of the City of Industry, while Lindblum citizens have recalled the cozy and exhilarating aspect of artistic nature touching their booming city walls. Now it seems that can become a possibility after the one year anniversary of Queen Garnet taking the throne. Sir Liam Winters, the head engineer of Regent Cid's most honored and esteemed airship crew, has been spotted spending time with the Queen, most recently attending the honorary ceremony of the dubbed Hero of Prevailing Peace,



*Zidane Tribal. The possibility of Sir Liam Winters ascending the throne of Alexandria has many business owners excited at the prospect of what the two kingdoms can become together. With the recent uproar over the rising prices of textiles from Lindblum and the cost of artisan supplies such as clay and watercolors, many citizens are beginning to grow hopeful over the idea of a possible matrimony between Queen Garnet and Sir Liam Winters. "It would be better than merging with Treno, which would offer nothing of value to the Kingdom of Alexandria," one citizen commented. "Treno is becoming a cesspool of crime with an underbelly for scams. What Alexandria needs to better itself is the innovations of the Lindblum regency to help bring quality of life in Alexandria to grander heights. We are outgrowing our small time city infrastructure quickly and if this is what Her Majesty decides to do to help with that, I'm all for it. Otherwise, it seems we are all plum out of ideas."*

Liam pursed his lips as he closed the paper, turning to again examine the rather dull and boring corner pub. It was everything he wanted and felt he deserved. To be a King with a brains for airships was exactly what a kingdom needed and everything he wanted to be. He couldn't help, however, the

small pinch in his gut that made him feel guilty. In a way, he felt like a cheater. But he rolled his shoulders and shook his head. He was helping Garnet, he reasoned. Someone had to pull the poor girl from the depths of her emotions. Otherwise, she was going to drown and flounder. Liam tucked the paper under his arm and pushed the door open. The bar was somewhat stuffy with less than a dozen men hunched over tables. Cigar smoke barreled towards the exposed rafters and Liam's eyes darted back and forth as he realized everyone was looking at him. He spotted Astrid on the ratty couch in the back lounge area. She was having an ale and furiously scribbling in a pocket book held together with meager string. When she spotted Liam, she grinned and waved furiously to bring him over. Boris delivered an entire bottle of whiskey to the table, along with tumblers filled with ice.

“Welcome, welcome!” Astrid greeted him as he seated himself. She acted as if the bar was her home. Liam was beginning to suspect it was. She wore the same cream-white tunic and tired black cloak. Her brown cotton pants sported a new patch in the knee and her boots were wearing thin. But still, her bright face was jarring and deceiving. It could have just been Garnet in peasants clothing. “I see you’ve got a

copy of the *Alexandria Tribune*. Do you like what it has to say?"

"Well, of course," Liam said, tossing it on the table and pouring himself a whiskey on the rocks. "I worry I can't keep up with the tabloids, even when it's about my own life."

"That's alright," Astrid grinned. "Just keep doing what you're doing; keep Her Majesty's heart nice and toasty."

"I don't know the purpose of you wanting to meet," Liam said, looking around the bar and giving his tumbler a shake. "But I'm glad you sent a message. I'm worried about the potion. Do you know of any side-effects they may cause? Such as headaches and a lack of energy?"

"That's exactly what I wanted to talk to you about," Astrid told him, helping herself to the whiskey as well. "I have inside castle resources and I believe Her Majesty needs an extra dose." She reached into her cloak, laying a vial on the table between them. Liam stared at the liquid that gleamed in the dusty sunset bleeding through the window.

“‘Inside Castle Resources’?” He echoed, slowly lifting his eyes. “Why would you have something like that?”

“You needn’t worry about that, I have my reasons.”

“You told me the potion would last a lifetime.”

“I consulted with my alchemist,” Astrid told him coolly, tilting her head back and allowing the whiskey to sting her throat. “It does last a lifetime, but in a special case like Her Majesty, with a heart so wretched and tired from grieving, she may just need an extra push. That’s all. One more nice cup of tea delivered by her beloved to make all the rumors in the tribune come true.”

Liam sat forward, pressing his elbows to his knees. “You told me you were in the business of dreams. Whose dreams do you take responsibility for?”

“Oh, anybody down on their luck who happens to stumble across the wake of my good fortune.”

“The men in these bars?” Liam asked, hunching his shoulders. “Do you buy them drinks all day and then tell their bosses they deserve better? What

about the shoe shiners outside the door? Do you give them more work?”

“Oh, Sir Liam, I do what I can as I see fit.”

“Then why do you have castle resources? Why are you trying to help me? Do I look like a charity case?”

Astrid smiled from behind her drink and also leaned in, bringing her face within inches of his. “Oh, Liam, that’s the awful thing about this world. Nothing can ever be fair, can it? The man with one hundred strokes of good luck seems to catch all the breaks, while another man misses his second stroke for the twentieth time. I can’t help everybody. I have to be selective before I pull myself from the wake of good fortune itself. Life is all a balance beam. This world operates strictly within that rule, too. That man over there, with the sooty face, may have only a few coins to his name while you have dozens and dozens, but to the world, that may equal the balance we need as a humankind to carry on. There will always be poor people and rich people. Sick and healthy. That’s just life. I do what I can, but I can only cheat the system so far.”

“Why me, though?” Liam shrugged, shaking his head. Astrid grinned and gently reached forward to

comb his dark hair away from his forehead.

“Sweet, just Liam,” Astrid laughed with her velvety voice. ‘You’ve read the tribune yourself. What you’re doing is good. You’re giving all these poor bastards and chumps the hope they need to work another day and put food on the table. Imagine the good fortune everyone can have if I just help you expedite things. You’ve said it yourself, the Queen punishes herself. We’re giving her the nudge she needs to transcend from the fog of her mind and do what’s best in all of our interests. Lindblum and Alexandria can finally be one. Import taxes and innovation can skyrocket. I see you as a golden Chocobo, Liam. Helping you, helps me.’ Liam was quiet for a moment as he pensively reached for the bubbly pink vial, twisting it between his fingers. Astrid watched him cautiously. “You feel bad, maybe even hesitant, I can tell. I’ve helped people like you who have a sense of impostor syndrome. What you’re doing is good, Liam.”

“And yet it feels so wrong,” He replied, his eyes still hovering on the vial.

Astrid gripped his wrist. “One more tea time this evening and I promise things will start to feel right.

Don't you want Her Majesty to be happy? What about your mother and the kingdoms?"

"And what about you? Will solidifying Lindblum and Alexandria's alliance help you at all?"

Astrid smiled. "More than you would ever know, Sir Liam."

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An owl hooted distantly and Zidane felt goosebumps pucker across his skin. Behind him, the dart ship's engine was slowly dying away with a whirling howl. Soldier Eliahna saluted as Steiner climbed the ladder from the deck and the two men meekly slung their backpacks over their shoulders as they approached the dense forest that concealed Black Mage Village. Zidane found his heart pounding in his chest and all the thoughts that previously clouded his mind had completely dissipated. It didn't seem too long ago the young man was here, but it brought a chill to him to realize it had been well over a year. How could time move so quickly? Even more, how could he just let it slip by him so passively? Slumbering away in Morrid's bed of straw, unaware of all of it. Now, it all seemed to just rest on his shoulders. Beside him, Steiner

stared through the twist branches and thick foliage as if it was death itself staring back at him. His entire body wanted to shake, but he held himself composed and took the first few steps forward, lifting the branches. Quietly behind him, Zidane followed. Birds and creatures seemed to scatter about at the disturbance as Steiner's armor rattled and Zidane's boots mushed through the leaves.

"Still know the way?" Zidane asked, ducking beneath a branch deftly. Steiner squeezed himself past a bush with bright purple berries.

"Of course," Steiner said, keeping his eyes forward. "You can see the boot marks. The Mages are not as discreet as they think."

Zidane looked to the moist forest floor that was very much different from the parched landscape leading up to it. He could see the wide foot marks that weaved around the branches. He furrowed his brow, however, and knelt, when he saw thinner marks in the bed of mud and dried leaves. "Are these... our footmarks? Look... they're human..."

Steiner paused and turned, holding onto his backpack strap. Behind him, an owl glided to the safety of another branch. Steiner pursed his lips, watching as Zidane brushed the dead and curled



leaves aside. “No, those belong to the Genomes.” Zidane immediately lifted his head with blue eyes filled with pain and confusion. Steiner turned his head away, unable to bear the look. “After we left you at the Iifa Tree, we came here to Black Mage Village. We... didn’t know what else to do. We had a whole ship full of people who did not know a thing of regular human life. Vivi decided to stay with them then. And the Mages and Genomes have been learning together ever since.”

Zidane looked back towards the tracks embedded in the dark terrain and ran his hand over the marshy mud once more before he stood and the men ventured further. The hooting of owls grew louder and much more cohesive. Zidane’s nerves ground against his skin and Steiner’s heart threatened to leap into his throat. Each tree branch that creaked and every foliage that fell over had the two men pensive as they found themselves in the narrow corridor that funneled them to the Black Mage Village. The crooked and weather torn wooden sides were creaky and tired. Zidane looked to them, almost longingly. Up ahead was the clearing where the forest broke apart to reveal a massive green pasture with even flowing hills. It was amazing the continent could support such lush flora and fauna.

The dry wind met Zidane and Steiner's skin and they squinted as they stepped from the forest, looking around the empty land. Just straight ahead, they could make out the beginnings of huts and smell fire. Zidane took a deep breath, bringing his shoulders up.

"Let's go," Zidane said, keeping his eyes forward. "They're expecting us, right?"

"Yes," Steiner replied, somewhat numb.

The two were still. Zidane kicked a few pebbles from the path and turned to the captain. "We've come all this way. We can't waste anymore time."

"I know."

Still, nobody moved. Zidane lowered his head and the gentle breeze brought his brown hair across the frame of his face. "Have you... thought about what you're going to say?"

"No," Steiner shook his head.

"You'll figure something out," Zidane told him. 'Come on, Steiner.' Zidane walked a few paces, his boots crunching along the path. He stopped, however, when he realized Steiner hadn't budged. "No one wants to ever do this, Steiner. It's not gonna

be easy. But we have to do it.” Steiner was quiet. A hooting owl drew Zidane’s attention out to the wide pastures spanning away from them. The fast moving clouds overhead cast rolling shadows down onto them. Zidane swore he saw a rabbit and he scanned the bright berry bushes. “Look, there’s never a good time to die. But it happens eventually. One day, I’m going to die... you’re going to die... along with Dagger and Beatrix and Eiko...” Zidane furrowed his brow and lowered his eyes. “One by one, we will all have to say goodbye. And what really sucks is that we don’t know which one of us will be last. Who will be the one having to send everyone off but still wake up another day and live?”

“I hope it’s not me,” Steiner said, solemnly. “I hope I die long before Beatrix.”

“I hope it’s me,” Zidane shrugged, kicking another pebble.

“Why would you say something so alarming?”

“Well... because I deserve it. After everything I’ve put you all through... I’m not a good friend, Steiner. I’m not a good person. I’m an impostor who got you all wrapped up in something awful and dark that’s affected all of us, whether we realize it or not,” Zidane told him with a stony face. “And I hope

I have to send you all off so I can die with those burdens because they're mine— mine all alone.”

“We all had something to fight for back then,” Steiner said, taking a few slow steps forward. “I was fighting for my sworn duty. Her Majesty for her kingdom... Freya was fighting for her people, for justice. And Master Vivi... he was fighting for himself.”

“And what was I fighting for, after all?” Zidane held his arms out at his side.

“You were fighting for us,” Steiner grinned lightly before he began walking again, heading with a purpose towards the smell of life and flickers of light careening between the thick trunks. Zidane watched him a few beats with a hot face before he started after the captain. The moment their feet met the wooden plank steps leading into the village, Zidane felt a shiver come up his spine. A wave of *deja vu* rushed over him. Blood coursed through his ears as the tree branches lifted to reveal the quaint little huts and cabins of Black Mage Village.

Immediately on the first porch, Zidane spotted a Genome. Her blond hair was long and braided on her shoulder and she wore a blue coat with white cotton pants that gripped her ankles tightly. She

looked and acted nothing like the soulless beings they were the last time he interacted with them. She was weaving with a wooden hoop. Two more Genomes were spotted raking hay by the Chocobo shed. They were grinning and speaking as they worked. A round black Mage emerged from a cabin to sweep the porch, but he did a double take when he spotted Steiner and Zidane and darted into the next house. Then a Black Mage leapt from the next door and the chain of word worked around the perimeter of the growing village. A Genome's leather shoes scuffed to the porch as she came around with a basket of vegetables. She slowed in her step to inspect Zidane but continued on without a word. Zidane cocked his head around and took a few steps forward. The village had more buildings. It reached further into the dense forest surrounding it. The Genomes all had a job, they were working in perfect harmony with the Black Mages. And it was all thanks to Vivi. Zidane couldn't help but feel deeply touched as he saw through a window a Genome on a ladder, handing things down from a shelf to a Black Mage. Vivi had made this happen and Zidane didn't even know about it.

“Zidane!” He heard a shrill, airy voice ring out. The sound of hurried footsteps carried down the

porch and he spotted Mikoto. Her hair had also grown long and she experimented with beads in the wavy blond locks. She raced down the steps, wrapping her arms around his neck. “You’re alive!”

“Mikoto!” Zidane was stunned as he gripped her hunter green coat. “You’re OK, too. Thank the gods.”

“I always knew this day would come,” Mikoto looked to Steiner. “I always knew Zidane would find his way back to us.”

“Where’s Vivi?” Zidane asked, holding her arm. Her face softened. It was mesmerizing how well she had learned human emotion. She was expressing herself.

“He is not well, Zidane,” She shook her head, her beads clacking together. “Let me take you to him. I fear he does not have much longer.”

“Are you certain?” Steiner asked as she began to lead them along the twisty porches. The Genomes and Black Mages they passed nodded with respect, pressing their hands to their chests. Zidane felt a deep anxiety coming over him. His insides grew clammy and a rush of blood pulsed through his head. This was really happening.

“We have been through this many times, I am afraid,” Mikoto replied, looking forward. “He is weak. His eyes are dim. It is his time.”

“But what about his research?” Steiner shook his head.

“Master Vivi has made good headway,” Mikoto looked over her shoulder. “But a feat such as that in alchemy takes time, Master Steiner. Many of our prophetic alchemies were finished after a long line of men attempted, but died before completion. Now, someone else will have to continue.”

“Who?” Zidane furrowed his brow.

“We do not know yet...” They came upon a modest cabin built between two massive trees bursting with fan leaves. Zidane paused and cocked his head back. A faded flag of Alexandria was pinned by the door, waving in the gentle breeze that broke between the canopy. Mikoto carefully opened the door. Zidane rubbed at the goosebumps puckering his skin and glanced up and down the walkway. Similar little cabins were built in a twisty fashion around the village. “Master Vivi, you have visitors.”

“They may come in,” Came a familiar but tired voice. Zidane’s throat grew pinched and he was numb. Steiner brushed by him, ducking his head to enter the door. “Steiner, it’s you! You came all the way here for me?”

“Well, but of course, Master Vivi,” Steiner grinned, bowing in the process. “I come with good tidings from Alexandria.”

“How is Dagger? And Beatrix?”

“Doing well, as usual,” Steiner said, formally.

Mikoto looked out the door, gesturing for Zidane to come in. But the young man was stuck in place, grinding his teeth together.

“Is someone else here?”

Mikoto again waved before she sighed and stepped outside, gently taking Zidane’s wrists. “Come on... it will be fine...”

Slowly, Zidane stepped towards the door and a lump was beginning to grow in his throat. The room was covered in waxy candles, mountains of books shoehorned wherever they could fit. There was a small table beneath a window that was cluttered with writings and quills. A small bed was tucked in the



corner with mountains of blankets weaved with interesting, familiar patterns. And buried beneath all of that was Vivi, laying against his pillow with a book. His hat had faded over the year from being beneath the sun. His yellow eyes fell on him, somewhat lightly and differently. There was a silence in the room as the two only stared at each other.

“Are... are my eyes playing tricks on me?” Vivi asked, looking to Mikoto. She only shook her head. “Zidane...?”

Zidane took in an uneven breath and his eyes grew wet. “Hey, Vivi.”

“But how?”

“It’s a long story,” Steiner said, pressing a hand to his shoulder. “But first, are you comfortable? Perhaps a pillow and some tea would be good for all of us.”

# Chapter Twenty-One

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## Chapter Twenty-One

The evening sun bled through the tall magnificent windows of the foyer of the castle. Beatrix wandered lonesomely, trying her best to pick up the slack Steiner had hurriedly left to her. She hadn't been outside for so long for quite some time. She wore her peacoat despite it being just a bit too warm. She kept her hands in her pocket, her sword forlornly beating against her leg. Without having to worry about the revolving visits from Steiner, she was free to preoccupy her mind in all the questions and dilemmas she faced head on. The baby had kicked last night. It was the first time Beatrix had ever felt something move. Steiner had called it the quickening. Beatrix shivered at the thought. There really was something growing inside of her. The very idea blew her mind away. How was she capable of growing life when she had been the ender of others? She paused beside a tall statue of knights armor. It had been freshly polished and gleamed in the sherbet light swirling into the room. Carefully, Beatrix reached into her coat and felt the growing bump. The quickening was an important moment,

Steiner had told her. Was it official, she wondered. Was she now truly a mother? The very label still felt so very foreign to her. She was trying, she truly was. Beatrix could tell Steiner was disguising his mass excitement. He remained cool and passive for her sake. She pursed her lips together. In a way, Beatrix felt like she was inadvertently punishing Steiner. That sweet man did everything for her and his shy, awkward ways were the most charming and comforting thing to the general. She knew she needed Steiner. Why was it so hard to love the small version of him growing inside of her? What held her back? These were the frustrating thoughts she always cycled back to. This was supposed to be natural, Beatrix thought. Every woman she'd ever known who had children naturally loved it, even before it was born. But the general blinked rapidly as she thought back on her own childhood.

Beatrix didn't see her father very often. He was quite busy working for the military. Despite being a high ranking, revered General, he never sent money home to her and her mother. Beatrix's mother did everything she could and the young girl watched her struggle. She sewed and stitched dawn to dusk. Their meals were always on time and warm, but the portions were never enough. Beatrix learned at a

young age to never ask for seconds. She was always teased at school by the girls in plaid and satin dresses. Beatrix's mother was only able to make her meager dresses from the leftover scraps of her clients projects. If she wasn't being teased, Beatrix was avoided by everyone as if she had a plague. The war stories, victories and losses, cycled around endlessly. During the great conflicts of her childhood, her peers would listen to their parents discuss her father over supper. Some of the stories were quite frightening. Beatrix heard snippets of her father carrying a stick with an enemies head stuck to it. How he was a no-mercy general who even ordered the frightened mother's and babies to be killed. The local barber dubbed him Peter the Butcher. And in turn, that had children nicknaming the young girl Beatrix the Butcher, the absolute brute not a single child wanted to know. And her mother couldn't do a thing about it. The woman had no backbone, Beatrix had decided in her adolescents. She let people push her around and keep her on her knees for just a few coins a day. She was unable to combat clients who decided not to pay her for her time. She allowed for Beatrix to sleep in a cold, musty attic, remaining friendless and withdrawn. Beatrix's mother never spoke a bad word of her father. When he was home, for just a few days

at a time, he would drink mead all day with his friends and then come home and be callous to his faithful wife. Beatrix sat in the attic during those times. She didn't even go to school. Her mother would climb the rickety ladder twice a day to place her meals beside her cot, just to save Beatrix from the choice words her father would have for her. He had wanted a son. The day came, when Beatrix was eleven, that her father had been defeated. It was rumored his head was on someone else's pike. The cruel children of the courtyard only teased her more. She was fatherless with a basket case for a mother. For a man who did nothing for the family, Beatrix's mother seemed lost without his meager presence. Beatrix was filled with a rage as she reached her teenage years. She stopped going to school when she was twelve. Instead, she went out to find oddball jobs while her mother laid on the ratty couch, staring at the exposed beams of the roof. Beatrix delivered newspapers and baskets of vegetables. She'd steal squash and cucumbers to fill her belly with in a hidden alley. When she turned sixteen, her mother succumbed to a broken heart. And when she was seventeen, their poor little house burned down after their neighbor spilled an oil lamp. Beatrix watched it all dissolve to ash. Her entire life was in the confines of that cottage. And she watched it become nothing.

And that fire caught her belly alight and she left for the heart of Alexandria, where she vehemently swore by the sword, became quite skilled, and vowed to change the name of fear within generals. She forgot everything she knew of family life. She forgot if she even knew anything about having a family. All she could trust was the cool steel of her sword.

Beatrix lifted her eyes to the window. The sunset was slowly waning, conceding to the purple sky. The baby would know nothing of that life, Beatrix reminded herself. Her parents couldn't get to the baby. They couldn't get to her. She had shrugged their haunting presence away quite some time ago, but with the recent news of the pregnancy, she could feel them slowly creeping back over her mind. Beatrix always wondered if her parents ever truly loved each other. What was her mother like when her father had first laid eyes on her? Where had they met? How quickly had Beatrix come along? These were things that were never talked about. And she never asked. Her mother dutifully wore her gold band until the day she died. It had been her anchor and perhaps also her shackles. If her father had wanted a son so bad, why had they never tried again? Why was Beatrix an only child? Sometimes

the woman wondered if she only helped fuel her father's rage. Just as he had when she had been in the midst of a battle, slashing and hacking, ducking and dodging, as if it was second nature. Many days, she was no different than her father. She was beginning to believe, however, she was just as much like her mother as well. The feelings of fear, being misguided, unprepared, at the mercy of it all only reflected the inner version of her mother Beatrix held. The general had always sworn to never let herself be that frightened again. To never let someone push her around or demean her. But as her hand caressed the growing bump in her belly, she could only wonder if her mother had been this frightened when she had become pregnant.

"Beatrix?" The general immediately shut her coat and turned to see Garnet holding a large manila folder to her chest, her eyebrows raised. Beatrix had been so wrapped up in her mind, she hadn't even heard Garnet's heels to the polished marble floor. "What are you doing inside this late? You should have been off hours ago."

"Steiner is away on business," Beatrix told her coolly. She pressed her hands into her pockets, being sure to push the coat closed. "I'm just making sure everything is in order."

“Mm, I suppose he took Zeke with him on this business,” Garnet hugged the folder and for a moment, Beatrix saw pink come into her eyes. Perhaps it was just the waning sunset. “I suppose they will not be back tomorrow? A shame... Zeke is excellent help at the hearings.”

“I’m afraid not, Your Majesty,” Beatrix replied, her heart thudding in her chest. “I will be sure someone else of equal value is with you tomorrow morning.”

“I am sorry to say, but Zeke is the most capable soldier on the Knights of Pluto,” Garnet smiled, though it was quite small.

“Yes, he is,” Beatrix could only nod. How dearly she wanted to shout, *Zeke is only Zidane acting like a jackass!* “Where is Sir Liam?”

“Oh, he is meeting with someone in town,” Garnet told her. “Which reminds me, I need to ask Delta to ready some tea for us. I imagine it’s quite chilly outside from the coat you’re wearing.”

“Summer is coming to an end,” Beatrix nodded. “The weather guru’s say we can expect the first frost in just two weeks now.”



“That will be nice,” Garnet said. “Don’t be out patrolling too much later. The night shift will be switching on soon.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Beatrix replied. Hesitantly she brought her hand up to salute. It looked rather awkward as she twisted her body to conceal her bump. Garnet nodded politely before she turned and headed around the stairs to find the meeting room. Beatrix let out a long sigh after her departure. She pulled the coat back again and pressed her hands to her belly. The baby had moved again. Just the smallest little nudge. Beatrix could only stare as Steiner’s words about the quickening echoed through her mind.

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“... I didn’t know what else to do, so I enlisted in the Knights of Pluto under the name Zeke Tisdoll. And it worked... for a week maybe,” Zidane said. He was sat on the floor, leaned up against the side of Vivi’s bed. A forgotten cup of tea sat beside him. Mikoto sat at the table, absolutely mesmerized by his tale. Steiner only watched him painfully recount it from a stool he perched in. Zidane had Vivi’s attention the whole time. The small, crumpled Mage

held his tea delicately and hung onto every word Zidane said.

“Wow... after all this time,” Vivi shook his head, placing his tea on the cluttered nightstand. “We’ve all blamed ourselves for so long... maybe even each other. But you came back, just like you promised Dagger.”

Zidane was quiet for a moment, his arm dangling off his bent knee. “Dagger doesn’t actually know I’m alive, Vivi...”

The cabin was quiet a moment and only the hooting owls could be heard through the door they had left open to allow the draft in. “Even after the months that have passed?” Vivi asked. His voice seemed so full of wisdom, it had a purpose. He sounded much different than the Vivi he had asked to leave him behind. “You’ve seen her nearly every day and that still doesn’t make you want to take the helmet off? Don’t you want to hug her?”

Zidane sighed and stretched his legs out, feeling rather pathetic on the dirt floor. “Yeah, I know Vivi. I’ve heard it all before and I’ve been down that road a dozen times. Now it’s starting to feel like I *have* to be Zeke. With each day passing, it’s harder and harder to go back. It’s like a river washing me

downstream. I don't know how I'd explain all of this to her. And now with an impending revolution, I think I need to be another faceless soldier in the fight if it means I can protect Dagger."

"*Revolution?*" Mikoto and Vivi echoed at the same time.

"It's nothing to alarm you," Steiner held his hands up. "Revolution may be too strong of a word, Zidane."

"Okay, you're right," Zidane ground his teeth together. "A *coup d'etat* sounds more reasonable."

"What is a... coup d'etat?" Mikoto asked slowly, lowering her tea cup into her lap.

"It means some people want to remove Dagger from power," Vivi said from his bed. He shivered beneath his quilts.

"But that is unreasonable," Mikoto shook her head. "Why did you not send word sooner? Is this not something we should be concerned about? What... what about Her Majesty's safety?"

"I mean," Zidane huffed. "I think we got it under control."

“I can’t imagine crowds of people unhappy with Dagger’s ruling,” Vivi propped himself up on his elbow. “She’s a great queen. Are you sure, Zidane?”

“I’m sure,” Zidane said, staring forward at the bushes across the walk path from the door. After a moment, he looked to Vivi with milky eyes. He hadn’t slept in nearly two days. “You gotta trust me, Vivi.”

Vivi’s eyes traced Zidane’s face before he nodded. “I trust you, Zidane.”

“Master Vivi, I have an alchemy question I’d like to ask you,” Steiner said, setting his tea on the nightstand. He leaned forward and Vivi only nodded to prod him on. “What kind of potion would have someone grow a pink ring in their iris that comes and goes?”

“A pink ring?” Vivi sounded surprised and he propped himself up against the headboard, clearing his throat. Steiner was quick to fluff his pillows. ‘Usually some kind of mind control potion... “He ran his hands together for a moment.” Mikoto, on the shelf behind you, there’s a green leather-bound book called *Alchemy of the Mind*. Could you bring it to me?’ Mikoto was prompt in running her fingers along the mass collection of books Vivi had foraged

from all over the world. Zidane only watched tensely, his hands curling against the dirt floor. Liam had done something. Vivi would know. And he only found himself on pins and needles as he realized she was probably all alone with him, making eyes from behind her magical lenses. He only felt himself sinking deeper into mud pit he had created for himself. Mikoto brought the book to Vivi and seated herself on the foot of the bed, keenly interested. “You said pink?” Vivi asked as he carefully thumbed through the crumbling pages. “Not orange or red?”

“Definitely pink,” Zidane said from the ground.

“Hmm...” Vivi paused on a few pages before skipping ahead a couple more. He went back a handful of pages, consulted something, and then flipped ahead again. ‘Huh, I suppose that should have been obvious,’ Vivi said, lowering the book in his lap. “Someone with a pink iris has drank a love potion. Let me guess... Eiko?”

“Her Majesty,” Steiner told him with a somewhat rhythm-less voice. Vivi paused, only looking between the two of them.

“How do you reverse it?” Zidane asked, sitting up on his knees now. “We need to get Dagger clear minded again. This is all part of some ploy.”

“Well...” Vivi still seemed quite perturbed as he looked over the page of squiggly writing and adept sketches and measurements. ‘There are several ways to make a love potion. The ingredients are all relatively easy to find. Mostly because people don’t really make love potions anymore... it’s a very outdated type of alchemy. Did you see the potion? The color could help us narrow it down.’ Steiner and Zidane looked to each other with pursed lips before they simply shook their heads. “The most common base of a love potion is buckweed. It grows along rivers and streams— anything with a rich fertile bank. If that’s the case, Dagger needs to eat mint.”

“That’s simple enough,” Steiner smiled, sitting up straight. “She loves lamb and mint sauce.”

“But what if it’s not that?” Zidane shook his head, raining on Steiner’s parade. “I’m telling you, this is more intentional than Liam just trying to cozy up to Dagger.”

“Are you suggesting Liam is part of this?” Steiner furrowed his brow.

“No...” He said, slowly, pressing his lips together. “I just think he’s too lovesick to realize he’s a pawn.”

“Well,” Vivi piped up again, running his finger along the page. ‘Another way to make it is with raw honey. That would mean Dagger needs to eat a peach.’ Zidane looked around the room before he went to the table, ripping a piece of parchment from a journal and scribbling with a quill across it. “A love potion with the base of toad skin will require an oglop.”

Zidane scrunched his nose up and paused from writing. “Like... she has to eat an oglop?”

Vivi nodded. “You could... grill it, I guess, to make it taste better.”

Zidane finished the sentence. “Okay, what else?”

“The rest of these potions start getting a bit more advanced,” Vivi told him, turning the page with his delicate fingers. “Are you sure whoever made it would have the means to pull it off? It requires quite a bit of gear. You need the most perfect crystal vials and, in some cases, diamond beakers to sustain the potency.”

“Might as well tell me so I have options,” Zidane said, collapsing in the chair and impatiently dabbing the quill in a jar of ink. “I have to try everything I can. I’m running out of time.”

“Okay, well, if the potion is made with oglop, Dagger will need the rib of a griffin.”

“Oh, for gods sake,” Zidane dipped his head as he painstakingly wrote it down.

“And if it’s made with bonnet flowers, she will need Cactaur juice.” Steiner’s face seemed to lose hope with each line Vivi read from the book. “This one says if it has beets in it, then she will need to eat duck. Oh, and if it uses Chocobo’s blood, then she needs lemon juice.” Zidane nodded as he quickly jotted it all down. When Vivi did not speak again, the young man looked up from his notes, watching as Vivi pored over the book.

“Is that all?” Zidane asked, reviewing the list. It was a bizarre assortment of possible fixes.

“There’s one more,” Vivi said slowly, his eyes still darting across the writing. “It’s not reversible with anything she ingests. It’s made with sleeping weed, but the oglop blood reacts with it in a way it does not physically affect her, but only actively counteracts a portion of her working mind.” Zidane grew cold. Sleeping weed was an easy commodity to find amongst the underbelly of Lindblum. Zidane always had some with him in his youth.



“What do you mean it’s not reversible?” Zidane furrowed his brow, his heart thudding in his chest. “If that’s what it is, is that game over? She’s stuck like that forever?”

“The book is kind of vague...” Vivi shook his head. “It says there’s nothing known that could reverse the effects. But if you know the subject well enough, perhaps there’s a way to jar that part of her working memory back.” Zidane sighed and rubbed sorely at his face. Steiner took a sip of tea, dismayed it had gone room temperature. Mikoto sat as straight as an arrow on the bed, looking between everyone in the room with her large eyes that still exuded an almost innocent curiosity.

“Perhaps it is like those books you gave me, Master Vivi,” Mikoto said, holding her hands out. “The ones about the Cornelia-girl and the Marcus-boy. True love?”

“I’m sorry, Mikoto,” Zidane sighed, keeping his flushed face turned towards the window. “Real life isn’t like a love story you see on stage. This isn’t Lord Avon’s world.”

“But she may be onto something,” Steiner said, reaching for the book in Vivi’s lap. The captain paced a few steps, cradling the old text in his arms.

*“It says ‘Though there are no known herbs or foods the subject can ingest that assuredly reverses the effects, the sleeping weed interacting with the oglop blood is a known affect stemming from hallucinogenic alchemy. Subjects under this influence may be open to the feelings of familiarity or deja vu, as noted on subjects under the affects of hallucinogenic stimulants’.”*

“So, what, I just take off my helmet and suddenly she’s normal again?” Zidane shook his head and furrowed his brow. “It won’t just go back to normal.”

“Of course it won’t,” Steiner held his arms out at his side. “You deserve to be slapped upside the face before you can expect a kiss.”

Zidane sighed and sunk down in his chair. “Vivi... what was the most common love potion base?”

“The buckweed,” Vivi told him.

“Then all Her Majesty needs is some lamb and mint sauce,” Steiner grinned.

“I hate to burst your bubble, but she needs raw, wild mint,” Vivi said. The captain paused. “Alchemy is very finicky. You can disguise potions in all kinds

of things, but you need one ingredient, and one ingredient only to reverse them. If the love potion could fail from someone's diet, no one would ever make them."

Zidane looked out the window again at the waning evening light as a headache began to loom on the horizon of his skull. His mind was only filled with visions of Garnet with her polite smile, her rosy cheeks, her dark round eyes. But it only grew sour as he thought of Liam with his dark curled hair, his bright eyes, and knowing smirk. How dearly the young man wanted to beat the lights out of him, but he knew it would be wrong. He ground his teeth together as he thought about all the dilemmas laid before him. He was a coward, he told himself. He had made such a mess of things. He didn't know what to do anymore, though. He felt like he was backed into a corner and it was all his fault. Garnet was slipping through his fingers. Why couldn't he just show her his face? What made him so fearful to be caught licking his wounds and covering the bruises and scars? Why couldn't he just let them all see his broken heart? Was it pride? Was it shame? He raked his hands through his hair and let out a sigh, keeping his face twisted away from the company in

the room. If he couldn't save Garnet, he didn't deserve to be Zidane anymore.

"Master Steiner, Zidane," Mikoto stood from the bed and ran her hands along the quilts to smooth them over Vivi's legs. "Perhaps I shall show you where to find a warm meal. Master Vivi probably needs a good rest. We will just take the book and discuss our other options later."

"Yes, of course," Steiner nodded, having to remind himself not to salute. "Master Vivi, we will be here after your rest."

Vivi wriggled beneath the quilts, his hat crumpling as he pressed himself into the downy pillow. "Yes, please find me soon... I want to help Dagger, too."

"You already have, Master Vivi," Steiner smiled quite woefully.

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Garnet sat prim and poised in the quiet sun room. The sun was slowly sinking behind the mountains. It was a beautiful evening. Garnet placed an elbow to the table in her lonesome, cocking her head to look over the bursting city below with its red thatched

roofs and windy cobblestone paths. How she wished for absolutely everything of prosperity to come over Alexandria. Her head faintly throbbed as she thought about her kingdom. Though the houses had been rebuilt, the stones had been replaced, the fences erected, Garnet couldn't help but sense a feeling of anxiety, a riveting sense of being broken, never to be whole again, plaguing the city of Alexandria. They made reparations and life had seemingly moved on... but not entirely. She knew for every one good deed she was able to do for her people, there were only ten more things to be solved. It was a hard and tiring time as a Queen and every day, things seemed to grow bleary for Garnet. She was overworked and exhausted she told herself. But it never seemed to get better. Garnet let out a sigh, glancing to the tea that was growing cold now.

She figured Liam would have returned by now. Garnet pressed herself into her lap as she pursed her lips, carefully watching Alexandria. Sir Liam Winters. She wasn't sure what it was about that man, but she found herself quite fond of him. He had been there for her during a hard time in her life. Liam had actually made her birthday enjoyable. The young woman now only found herself dreading her birthday each year. It would only be another winter

until the next one. All it did was remind her of something she felt she had lost. But he had made it bearable for her. It was obvious he cared for her. Garnet needed that, she thought. Her heart had been so guarded for a year, hanging by a thin thread that only made her bleed. Her hero of prevailing peace would always be there for her, somewhere deep in her heart, to make her thankful for the life she could go on to lead. But Liam was here for her now. Her hands twisted in her lap. Could she really believe that? She felt something stirring inside her. But she couldn't determine what it was actually telling her. Was she feeling something legitimate? Did she even know what she was feeling?

The door opened and Garnet came to her feet and straightened her shoulders. She put on a grin and turned but was surprised to see a soldier from Squad Beatrix at the door. Her long red hair had been braided into a plait that fell from her helmet. She must have been a new recruit, Garnet didn't recall her face. "Sir Liam will see you on the west garden balcony for tea."

"Oh, I have tea right here," Garnet told her, pressing her hands to the back of the chair. "I believe there was a mix up in communication."

“Sir Liam insisted,” The soldier replied. Garnet was hesitant a moment before she began towards the door. “It’s getting chilly, Your Majesty. Take your cloak.”

Garnet reached for the green velvet cloak that laid across the dresser by the door and followed the soldier out. Down the stairs they weaved. The soldier occasionally glanced to the side of Garnet’s face, but the young ruler was used to it and kept her eyes forward. The soldier stopped by the french doors and saluted. Garnet was slow to shrug into her cloak, the soldiers eyes never leaving her. Deftly, Garnet tied the satin bow off before she stepped out on the balcony, bathed in oranges and golden rays of waning sunlight. The garden table had a piping hot kettle of tea on it, along with fruit tarts glazed with a sweet syrup. Candles lined the balustrades and cluttered the table. The flames warmly illuminated the balcony as the light continued to fade away. Liam stood beside the table with his dashing smile, his dark curls bouncing in the cool breeze.

“Good evening, Your Majesty,” He greeted, pulling a chair out for her. Garnet was still beside the doors, but a grin had come to her face. “I apologize for the last minute change in plans. I do

hope I haven't inconvenienced you by bringing you to the garden this evening."

"What a lovely evening to change the plans," Garnet said, coming across the balcony.

"What a beautiful coat, Your Majesty," Liam gently ran his hands along her shoulder as she gracefully seated herself.

"I told you, you don't have to call me that," She watched as he seated himself. Her tea had already been served and sat enticingly before her, steaming on its handmade saucer.

"Oh, but I like to," Liam flashed her a pearly grin over the flame flickering between them. "It's who you are, after all. Look, Garnet, at the city in the last of the day's light. This is all yours."

"Yes... it is," Garnet's eyes sparkled as she gazed over the castle walls. "Alexandria is so beautiful. It's as beautiful as I remember when I was a child. Though, things seemed much bigger back then. I worry sometimes, Liam, that I'm not right for this kingdom or these people. How do I ensure what's right, like all of those before me, when the world is changing so rapidly? The world is so different now, even more so than just a year ago."



Liam was quiet as the frogs began to croak. The last of the sunlight was glancing off Garnet's round porcelain cheek. He shifted in his seat, reaching across the table to gingerly take her hand. She was surprised by his touch. Her big brown eyes seemed so unsure. "Garnet... you know I care about you, right?"

"Yes, you have made your intentions very clear," Garnet turned her hand to graze her fingertips along his wrist. "All of it has not gone unnoticed, Liam."

"And... do you trust me?"

She fluttered her eyelashes for a moment. "Yes, of course I do. Why are you asking me all of this, Liam?"

Liam smiled gently as he caressed his finger over her hand. "It's nice to hear the reassurance. I suppose I haven't been too secretive about my feelings. I think you're wonderful, Garnet. I want to spend as much of my time as I can with you. You're brilliant. I could listen to you talk all evening. You don't give yourself enough credit. And I just want to shower you in all the praise and love you deserve, Garnet." She felt her heart accelerate and a flash of blood come over her forehead. Garnet pulled her hand back, her cheeks emanating in the cool night

that now surrounded them. “I’m sorry, was that too forward?”

“No, I apologize...” Garnet shook her head, hunching in her cloak. “I’ve just never done something like this before. The courting, the getting to know each other... it should all come so naturally and yet I haven’t got a clue. The first time I ever felt anything like this before was... rather unconventional.”

Liam watched her closely as she stewed in the orange flicker of the candlelight surrounding her. He ran his hand along his jaw. “What made you... love Zidane?”

Her dark eyes darted towards him and there a flicker of pink that was dashed out just as quick. It seemed like she had to think and she looked out over the garden where the fireflies began to dance between the velvet, waxy leaves. After a moment, Garnet shook her head and grinned, her eyes becoming glossy. “He jumped for me.”

Liam was quiet before he cleared his throat. “Let’s drink our tea, sweet pea. Let’s enjoy this beautiful evening together.”

“You’re right,” Garnet said as she untangled herself from the past. Momentarily, her headache intensified, but she reached for her cup. “Thank you for putting this all together, Liam. Such a sweet and wonderful gesture.”

“I’d do anything for you, Your Majesty,” Liam told her, watching as she tilted her head back and drank the tea. Anxiety riveted against his skin. She set the tea cup down and the pink began to sink through her dark eyes. Garnet looked across the table at him, somewhat still. “Is your tea alright?” Liam asked, keeping his voice steady.

Garnet grinned with her brightly streaked eyes. “Everything is fine, thanks to you.” They were quiet for a moment in cool summer night. “I think... I love you, Liam. I’ve never said it to anyone before. Not even Zidane.” This time, she felt nothing when she spoke his name. Liam could only he smile when he saw the way her face looked. All her angelic features were lifted up and she looked so genuinely happy. It squashed the guilt he felt and he reached across the table for her again. Garnet was accepting of the touch, offering both of her hands to him.

“With the first frost approaching, I’m not scared,” Liam said with his smoldering smile. “Our love will

keep us warm, my darling.”

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All kinds of creatures hooted and rustled just beyond the foliage that burst against the porch. The night sky was littered in stars that formed a collective milky belt scattered above. Zidane sat on the edge of the porch, his feet dangling just above the rhythmic creek. A bowl of noodles and veggies steamed beside him, but he wasn't hungry. Instead, he watched the stars. His feelings washed over him in bursts. He went through sorrow, frustration, anxiety, and exhaustion over and over again. Next to him, Mikoto had her back pressed to a beam. She had been watching the young man for quite some time as she sipped her tea. Steiner wasn't far behind them, sitting on a bench and eating his noodles slowly. Zidane sighed, gripping the edge of the porch.

“That is your fourth huff in twelve minutes,” Mikoto said, swatting a bug from her face. Between the large fanned leaves, fireflies twinkled. “Something is on your mind.”

Zidane lowered his head and his dark bangs dangled in front of him. He ran his tongue along his

teeth. “That’s an understatement.”

“Is your meal not up to your standards?” Mikoto sat forward, her green jacket bagging on her thin frame. “I can tell the Mage to relight the fire.”

“No, it’s fine...” Zidane shook his head. But still, he didn’t reach for the bowl. Mikoto’s fingers tapped to the side of her mug before she sat back again, looking to the stars she watched every night. She took a timid sip, her eyes never leaving the sky.

“You said that life was not like the love stories Lord Avon wrote,” She said. Zidane was still. “But I am sorry, I am failing to see how this is different. You love Her Majesty and she loves you. Why can you not be together?”

“Well, you’ve read the books, haven’t you?” Zidane looked to her with pursed lips. ‘Cornelia and Marcus could only be together when they both died beside each other. And no matter how many times you read the book or watch the play... “Slowly, Zidane’s eyes trailed towards the dark winding paths sprawled before them.”... you can’t change any of it. All you can do is sit there and watch, knowing Marcus must die before the ending.’ Mikoto was quiet as she watched her tea steam. “Besides...” Zidane’s voice cut through the night again. “If I

can't reverse the potion, then it's really over, Mikoto. She'll love Liam for the rest of her life."

Behind them, Steiner's armor rattled as he came to his feet to lean against a beam, dabbing his face with a napkin. "Magic may be powerful and absolute, but it has its flaws, Zidane. It cannot control destiny."

"Yeah, well, what if she *was* destined to love Liam?" Zidane shrugged, shaking his head. "And fate had a funny way of making it happen."

Mikoto's slender fingers came to gently grab his arm and he looked to her serious blue eyes. "You know that is not true, Zidane. Why do you speak such lies to yourself? You and Her Majesty were meant to be."

"What makes you say that?" Zidane asked, furrowing his brow.

"Because you both love each other," Mikoto said, tightening her grip on his arm. "Anyone could see that by being around the both of you for a little bit. And if there is one thing I have learned about this strange new planet, it is that love is a force. Love makes all things possible, even for the most basic human. Without love, the humankind of this planet

would be baseless and without cause. Is that not why you are doing all of this? If you did not love her, would you have even come back to us, just to watch from the shadows?”

Zidane was quiet again and looked through the canopy of trees, spying the full moonlight leaking through the foliage. An owl hooted and Zidane felt himself tense. “I do love her,” He finally said without looking to anybody. “I’d do anything for her, but...”

“But what?” Mikoto asked softly.

Zidane shook his head and, surprisingly, smiled. “I don’t know,” He laughed. ‘Maybe I’m not right for her. Maybe Liam is. I love her, but I don’t want to be king. But he’d gallantly wear the crown.’ He slid from the edge of the porch and stepped into the creek without a care. He sloshed through the water, the chilliness washing along his ankles. “That’s what is so messed up about all of this. Damned if I do, damned if I don’t, right? Even if she knows it’s me, what would even happen? I can’t be with her if I’m not the king. So what the hell am I even doing?!” He ground his teeth together and kicked through the water.

“It is love,” Mikoto told him, setting her mug on the porch. “Love makes us do crazy things, so I have been told.”

Zidane turned towards the porch, the water rippling away from his boots. He looked to the captain, who was only staring back at him with his arms crossed over his chest and his shoulder pressed against the beam. “Well? What do you have to say?” Zidane asked, holding his arms out at his side. “Are you waiting to call me a bumbling idiot, ’cause nows your chance.”

“In a way,” Steiner sighed, tilting his helmet back. “It’s almost fascinating watching the way you bumble on. A year ago, you were quite the cocky and sure man. Now a year later, you doubt so much of yourself and practically everything you do. You’re really going to let Liam win this, Zidane? You’re going to force me and Beatrix to serve Her Majesty for the rest of our days knowing she’s been duped by a potion into loving that wrench monkey?”

“Steiner—” Zidane arched his eyebrows.

“After everything I’ve done for you. And Master Vivi and Her Majesty, too,” Steiner shook his head. “You weren’t the only one putting your neck on the line for the people you cared about. We all did. Now



you're sitting here telling me you can't be with her because she's a Queen? What has gotten into you? Planet to Zidane, are you in there? You're letting too much Zeke come out."

Zidane stared at Steiner with stony eyes before he sighed and stuffed his hands into his pockets, feeling rather pathetic in the creek. "I deserve that..." He muttered. Beneath his hand, he heard the crumpling of parchment and slowly he withdrew the list he had hurriedly made earlier. *Lemon juice. Oglop. Griffin ribs.* Zidane held the letter tensely before looking back to Steiner. "I won't let her be under the influence of that potion the rest of her days. But... she's free to love him."

Steiner watched Zidane carefully. "She's not going to if we reverse the potion, Zidane."

On the path up ahead, the trio heard boots to the gravel and a Mage with a ball of fire in their palm emerged from the dark twisty forest beyond the central entrance. "Miss Mikoto, Master Vivi is awake."

"Excellent, I shall be there momentarily," Mikoto said, standing and forgetting her tea cup. She cast one more glance over Zidane, watching how the water divided around his legs. She then turned and

left. Steiner grabbed the thick, aged alchemy book from the bench and approached the edge of the porch. After a moment of only staring at each other, Steiner threw the book towards Zidane. The young man caught it deftly, though he staggered and splashed through the creek because of its size.

“Study up,” Steiner told him. “We cannot allow ourselves to be so easily out-witted.”

The two were quiet, nearly solemn, as they walked side by side on the dark paths. The gentle breeze made the forest seem so alive. Splashes of milky moonlight came across their trail as they went to Vivi’s cabin where the door had been left ajar. Carefully, Steiner pushed it open, where they found Mikoto on her knees beside the bed with her hands folded together. When she heard Zidane’s dusty books come in through the door, she looked over her shoulder with a face that was gravely worried.

“He grows weaker with each rest.”

Steiner was slow to come near the bed. Vivi’s golden eyes were not their normal intensity and he laid in the bed sorely, resembling something rather broken. Zidane clutched the alchemy book against him with shallowed breaths as he dumbly entered the warm cabin. The captain dropped to a knee

beside the bed, pressing a hand to his chest. “Master Vivi, your heart of pure gold, the exquisiteness of your character, will never flounder in a cruel world such as this. I am honored to know you—”

“Please, Steiner...” Vivi whispered from his pillow with his crumpled hat and wrinkled faded blue jacket. “Don’t say goodbye to me.”

“Master Vivi, I...” Steiner pursed his lips together. Numbly, Zidane set the book on the table and came to the foot of the bed. Tiredly, Vivi’s eyes looked to him.

“We all really did it,” Vivi said. Zidane’s eyes grew wet at the sound and he struggled to control his breath.

“We did what, Vivi?” Zidane asked as the first of his hot tears began to streak his cheeks.

“We all survived, Zidane,” He replied. ‘We didn’t let Kuja or any of his tricks take us away. For so long... I had this feeling of failure that we didn’t really do it... because we had to sacrifice you. But it wasn’t all for nothing because you’re standing here right now. You’re broken... but you’re still the Zidane I remember.’ Zidane lowered his wet eyes as a sparking tear glided off his jaw. “And Steiner, I

know you'll keep doing what's right for Dagger and Beatrix... and all of Alexandria. I'll never forget how kind and accepting you were of me, even from the beginning of our travels." Steiner's face pinched in pain and he watched Vivi with eyes that regretted everything. "Take the book. Save Dagger."

"I will, Vivi," Zidane told him.

"And there's one more thing I need of both of you," Vivi said.

"Anything," Steiner reached for the edge of the quilts but stopped short, as if it were hot. Zidane watched him as the warm tears made his sight bleary.

"I want both of you to leave."

There was silence in the cabin besides the rustling foliage and hooting creatures. Zidane pressed his lips together and shook his head. "What...?"

"I don't want either of you here when it's my final moment," Vivi told them, slumping his head back against the pillow. "When you think of me, I don't want you to remember me like this. The world still needs both of you. Alexandria and our friends need you. It seems it's the end of the road for me

but... I can't be sad. And I can't let you two be sad either. I may be scared, but I can't forget all you two taught me about being afraid. And whatever you're afraid of now... I hope you think about me and then do it.' Zidane turned away from the bed as the tears fell down his cheeks faster. He approached the book, watching as his tears dribbled across the tired old leather. Even Steiner's head had dropped and he trembled before the crumpled Mage. Mikoto watched soundlessly. Zidane's hands curled into fists and he looked out the window of the cabin, wanting to scream. "Zidane." The young man was slow to turn to his dear friend. "You'll fix things. I trust you, Zidane."

Mikoto carried a torch ahead of Steiner and Zidane as she lead them back towards the dark forest. The Mages lifted their hands in respect as the two men bobbed past with red, scorching eyes. Zidane's fingernails dug into the book as they approached the opening of the forest that was so dense, moonlight could not find its way through. The owls hooted at Zidane openly and he felt his blood throb against his skin. Steiner was so numb. He was surprised his legs were even capable of carrying him. Mikoto turned towards them, the

orange flame illuminating the side of her porcelain skin.

“I trust you know the way back to your ship,” Mikoto told them. ‘I will... send word once there is something more to report.’ No one replied. “I will make sure he is comfortable and remain with him as he passes on to the other side.”

Zidane’s raw eyes looked into the forest that was as dark and twisty as his own future was forging out to be. “We’ll be in contact.”

He took a step forward, but Mikoto reached out, pressing a hand to his chest. “Please... take care of yourself, Zidane.” He was quiet as he only nodded to Mikoto, brushing past her in the next moment to ford the sprawling forest before him. Steiner turned to take one more glance at Black Mage Village. The cabins looked so warm and inviting against the backdrop of a cold, rigid forest. The village was quiet and at peace. The creaking of the mill caught his attention and the captain’s eyes followed the weaving, peaceful creek as it languidly washed by.

“Will you... send me Master Vivi’s studies?” Steiner turned to Mikoto. The young girl seemed surprised, tilting the torch away from her face.

“You will continue Master Vivi’s work?”

“I’ll try to... for him,” Steiner nodded. “If I cannot, there is always someone else that can. It’s our turn now, Mikoto, to help give these Mages the lives they deserve. Master Vivi is a testament to it. They were not somebody else’s fool or little toy. They’re fragile lives with feelings and dreams, just like the rest of us. They deserve more... like Master Vivi.”

Mikoto looked over the flame of her torch to watch the moon as it sailed towards the center of the sky. “When you receive his letters and his favorite books... you will know what to do, Master Steiner.”

“Thank you,” Steiner bowed to Mikoto before quietly, and almost hesitantly, he began to brush into the forest. The twigs ground off his armor and he walked with stiff shoulders, willing himself to only look forward. Up ahead on the path, he could see Zidane’s deflated figure ducking beneath the branches. The captain was determined to make things right. Unfortunately, he didn’t know just how wrong everything was.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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The airship returned to Alexandria just as dawn broke over the city. Zidane had laid down in the narrow, meager bunk beds beneath the cockpit but he had gotten no sleep. Zidane had only stared at the wood above his head while the engine groaned and the ship jostled in the air. With exhaustion rearing an ugly head, he dressed in his armor and was finishing the last belt on the chest piece when Steiner climbed down the rickety ladder to collect his things. The captain paused and watched as Zidane wiggled the armor straight on his body and slowly reached for his helmet. It had been scuffed up and desperately needed a polish. He stared at it forlornly as it dangled on the tips of his fingers.

“You’re doing your shifts today?” Steiner asked, collecting his bag over his shoulder and carefully grabbing the book from the cabinet.

“The public hearing is this morning,” Zidane told him. His eyes throbbed in their sockets, his stomach twisted in agony, and his head hurt like no other. “I



should help Dagger. We don't know what to expect anymore."

"Have you thought about what's been said?"

Zidane pressed his lips together and snagged his backpack from the bed. "Yeah, but none of it makes anymore sense than it did yesterday." Zidane brushed past Steiner, grabbing hold of the boards on the ladder.

"We have to try, Zidane," Steiner said, turning to look at him.

Zidane ground his teeth together before he slipped the helmet over his head. Without another word, he climbed the ladder and emerged onto the deck of the airship. The tall vaulted ceilings of the Alexandrian Castle stood above him. Several soldiers were busy with the airship; scrubbing it, inspecting the engines, and taking crates back and forth. Zidane greeted the few he knew and passed his backpack off to Mullenkedheim, who was on his way to the barracks for an early breakfast. The massive hallways he wandered through felt so confining to him. The red carpet made him nervous and the dark portraits on the walls gave him anxiety. It was exhaustion, Zidane told himself. He hadn't slept in nearly three days. He wondered if he'd ever

sleep again. Garnet's morning meal would be served soon, so Zidane stationed himself outside her private chambers like he always did. He pressed his sore back into the wall, resigned to staring out the window as morning dawned across the sleepy town. He didn't know how he could even face Garnet. Who would tell her of Vivi's passing? How would she react? Everyone's words were echoing and bouncing about in his head. He knew they were all right. But he wanted to tell them to screw off. Zidane shook his head and swatted his hands, as if that would send the cloud of thoughts away.

The chamber doors opened and Zidane immediately straightened up and prepared himself to salute. He only found himself as still as a statue, however, when Liam came out the doors. The airship engineer's cheeks immediately grew into the shade of tomatoes, as if he had been caught red handed. He tugged at his jacket with all the shiny buttons and belts and squared his shoulders, clearing his throat. The two men only stared at each other. Zidane had to resist the urge to send his hand in for a hook against Liam's jaw.

"Zeke, was it?" Liam asked, rather hesitantly. Zidane was slow and robotic with his nod. Liam smoothed his pants and shuffled his loafers for a

moment. “Well, pleasant morning to you. I was... I was just dropping by to steal some early kisses before the day’s work.”

Zidane cocked his head to see into the room behind him. Garnet must have been in the dressing room. There was a fire roaring in the mantle which gleamed across the unmade poster bed with its white silk sheets. “You slept here last night, didn’t you?” He asked, feeling his stomach constrict even harder. A stitch ran up the edges of his ribcage and he wanted to keel over, but Zidane remained on his feet, burning up beneath his unpolished armor.

Liam managed to keep his head on straight despite his own inner burning anxiety. “Please, don’t report this to your captain. I understand it’s a violation of the castle’s authority, but Her Majesty was welcoming of it. I promise on my honor, it is not what you think.”

Everything inside of Zidane was pinging about his body, desperately trying to unleash itself. But he held it all in. He thought steam would come out of his ears and blow his helmet clean off his head. Zidane bit his tongue so hard, he tasted copper. “I suggest you don’t be found in this hallway so early

in the morning. If I catch you again, I will have to report it to my captain.”

Liam nodded quickly. “Yes, of course. I wouldn’t want to upset my welcome.”

Zidane flipped the grate on his helmet open, revealing his face to Liam with his intense blue eyes. “Well, you’re already doing a lot of that. I know what you’ve done, Liam.”

“I... I did nothing,” Liam shook his head, furrowing his brow. Inside, however, his heart pounded against his ribcage. “I did not touch Her Majesty in anyway undesirable to her.”

“Stop talking while you’re ahead,” Zidane looked to him with hard eyes.

Liam was still as he inspected the soldier. He had never seen the bodyguard’s face before with his bright blue eyes and clear complexion. The young man looked frightfully tired, perhaps even overworked. Liam tilted his lips for a moment before he glanced over his shoulder, pulling the chamber doors shut. The tall, slender man crossed his arms over his chest. Zidane ground his teeth together, pulling his helmet from his head like he was looking for a fair fight. His molded brown hair

flopped over his forehead as he tensely pressed his helmet in the crook of his elbow. Liam was nearly a head taller than him, but Zidane was used to being the short guy with a mean left hook. Liam sighed. “You were the last person I wanted to catch me like this.”

“Why’s that?” Zidane asked, furrowing his brow. An intense heat waxed and waned through his body. He couldn’t decide whether to cry or to laugh maniacally. Liam’s face looked so punchable to the young man. He ran his tongue along his front teeth as Liam sighed with his hot, embarrassed cheeks.

“Well, not only are you Garnet’s bodyguard, but I know you care for her, too,” Liam told him. Zidane could feel every muscle curling inside of him. The way her name sounded on his tongue made a heat flare inside of Zidane. Her name did not belong in his mouth. “Working closely with a woman such as that... it’s impossible to not be smitten by her. You don’t have to try and deny it, either, Zeke. I can understand why. That’s what makes this situation so much more awkward.”

Zidane could feel his own face heating up and he pursed his lips. So many words barraged at the gates of his mouth. He wanted to berate Liam, he wanted

to expose him. Fleetinglly, he thought of Vivi, remembering the way his tired and frail body caressed the pages of the book. Zidane realized he had only been staring at Liam and cleared his throat. "I'm just a soldier. My job is to ensure Her Majesty's safety. That's all."

Liam tilted his head and nodded. "I understand. I'll go now."

Zidane's body felt as if it had been encased in cement as he watched Liam turn the corner and leave the private hallway. He let out a long sigh and wandered towards the window. His eyes were dry and throbbed in their sockets as he slowly looked over the little nestled homes of Alexandria. What was he going to do, he wondered. Slowly, but surely, Zidane was losing more and more control of the situation. Everything was coming at him from different directions. His heart panged as he thought of Vivi, but quickly his mind darted towards Astrid, and then bitterly onto Liam yet again. He wanted to kick himself. He wanted to ram his head into the wall. Why did everything have to be so difficult? It was his own damn fault.

"Zeke?" Zidane felt himself freeze, keeping himself turned towards the window. His armor

nearly rattled on his frame as his heart began to pound. ‘You’re back already?’ He heard Garnet’s muted heels press against the carpet. “I suppose the public hearings are that much fun to have you running home so quickly. Welcome back. It was a quiet day without you yesterday.” Stiffly, Zidane pulled his helmet over his head and secured the grate before he turned to look at Garnet. Her cheeks were rosy and full of color that morning. Her thick hair had been braided into a pleat that fell over her shoulder in sheer volume. She was wearing an orange skirt that morning with a frilly white button-up. She was nothing short of an angel, naturally, and it only pained Zidane more to see her. She grinned at him with her dark eyes. “You know, I always imagined you were blond... I don’t know why. Blond seemed fitting for you.”

Zidane laughed, though it felt a little forced. “It was in my youth, but then I stopped going out in the sun,” Zidane told her as they began their walk to the dining hall.

“I imagine the artist life kept you cooped up,” Garnet told him. A small smile was consistently plastered across her pink lips. She really seemed to be on cloud nine. She folded her hands behind her

back, her lacy cuffs bouncing with her light steps. “What made you want to be an artist, Zeke?”

“Well,” Zidane glanced out the tall wall length windows they passed. It was getting hard to come up with new stories on the fly and he constantly worried about contradicting himself. “I wanted to be an actor once upon a time... but obviously that didn’t work out. So I decided to paint. But I don’t do much of that anymore. Not since the war.”

Garnet looked to him as her hair framed her round face. “That is one thing I strive for in the wake of the war. We all endured so much and we became fractured along the way. But recently, I’ve started to feel more... positive. I feel we can fix things. You deserve to be who you are, Zeke, and do the things you love with people you love.”

Zidane was quiet for a moment as they turned the corner. At the end of the hallway, the brightly polished dining hall could be seen. And Liam’s dark head stuck out like a sore thumb as he busied himself spreading jam on a biscuit. Zidane finally glanced to Garnet. “Yeah, I’d like for that to happen again, Your Majesty.”



When Beatrix opened her eyes, she realized she had overslept. The mid-morning rays of light bathed her small bedroom and she sat up, cursing under her breath. Sorely, she rubbed her hands against her face and then raked her fingers through her hair. She paused, however, when a scent made it to her nose. Beatrix perked up and furrowed her brow. Quickly, she got up from bed and grabbed her robe. She tied it around her rounding belly and pressed through the living room before coming to the kitchen, her hand slowly curling around the door frame. There was Steiner, in a comfy tunic and a pink gingham apron, cooking breakfast. It only took a moment for him to notice her and he grinned.

“You’re back so soon?” Beatrix asked, coming into the kitchen now. “What... what about Vivi? What happened?”

Steiner’s smile seemed somewhat sad as he lowered his eyes and gave the sizzling bacon a poke. “I’m home so as to honor Master Vivi’s final wish.”

Beatrix approached him, pressing her hand to his shoulder blade. “Steiner... I’m so sorry...”

Steiner flipped a pancake and shook his head. “How were things while I was gone?”

Beatrix wandered towards the cabinet and pulled the kettle out. Peppermint tea was desperately needed to get her morning on the way. She filled the kettle with water and simply shrugged. “Not much to report. Her Majesty had a quiet day with Liam. She’s grown quite attached to him it seems.” Beatrix looked to him as she placed the cap on and set the kettle on the stove. “Was Vivi at least able to talk some sense into Zidane about his little conspiracy?”

Steiner pursed his lips as he carefully constructed a plate of bacon, pancakes, and sausage for Beatrix, passing it to her. Their eyes met, however, and they shared a stare as the plate steamed between them. “Unfortunately, it seems Her Majesty is under the influence of a love potion.”

Beatrix only stared at him for a moment with arched eyebrows. “You’re joking, right? Love potions are just some old lore from books, Steiner. Any alchemist today would laugh at you if you asked for a love potion.” Beatrix took her plate to the table and paused when she saw the green book. She settled into a chair and reached for it. “Vivi gave this to you?”

Steiner nodded as he put his plate together. “There’s a dog-eared page. That’s the section about

love potions.”

“This book is over a century old,” Beatrix furrowed her brow as she carefully turned the frail pages. “How could it possibly be a reliable source, Steiner?”

Steiner seated himself across from her and hungrily dug into his meal. He took a crispy bite from his bacon, his dark eyes darting to Beatrix. “It’s reliable, Beatrix, trust me. Master Vivi said the same thing, it’s a very outdated practice. But that pink ring... that’s why none of us recognized it—how could we?”

Beatrix looked over the drawings of human eyes depicting the ring. It did look quite similar to what was afflicting the queen. Beatrix shook her head and looked back to Steiner. “So, how do we fix it? Sir Liam must be prosecuted for this. Is the alliance with Lindblum this important to everyone it’s worth altering Her Majesty’s personality?”

Steiner heaved a sigh as he ripped at another piece of bacon. “We don’t know how to fix it.”

“*What?*” Beatrix’s eyes were wide as saucers. The kettle shrieked, startling the general. She went

to it, pouring herself a cup. “You’re telling me Vivi didn’t know how to reverse it?”

“Well, there’s a problem...” Steiner took the book into his hands as he munched away on his sausage. “There are several ways to make a love potion. And what ingredients were used are a key factor in how to reverse it. Master Vivi said the most common form of love potion is made with buckweed.”

Beatrix scrunched her nose up as she cut into her fluffy pancakes. Steiner may have been a klutz sometimes and occasionally heavy-handed, but he was indeed a masterful chef. Beatrix could eat his meals happily for the rest of her days. But she looked to Steiner in that moment with a face of disgust as she put the pancake in her mouth. “That gross, slimy, wispy plant that grows along the mossy creeks?”

“Yes,” Steiner nodded. “If that’s the case, then Her Majesty needs to consume a raw leaf of mint to reverse it.”

“And if it’s not that?”

“Well... there are dozens of other potions with dozens of reversals,” Steiner closed the book and

sighed before he set it on the nearby counter. His fork scraped against the plate as he worked on his pancakes. “We can only hope it is the buckweed.”

“Where would Liam even find a love potion?” Beatrix’s brow knitted together. “No alchemist today would waste their time on a petty fairytale practice.”

“He got it from the same people trying to start a mutiny in the street,” Steiner told her. “Three girls. Astrid, Delta, and Felicia.”

Beatrix stared at him for a moment, letting out a slow sigh. “Steiner, are you sure Zidane isn’t just working you up? Things are different in Alexandria since the war. Anxiety is still high and times are uncertain as we grow. But you can’t seriously believe these three young girls could cause any form of meaningful revolution, do you?”

“From what I heard at the bar that one night, Beatrix...” Steiner shook his head. “She has a following. There is support. And if Zidane is right and she truly is a product of an affair His Majesty had... then Astrid holds more bearing to the throne than Her Majesty.”

“I’m sorry, this all just sounds so elaborate and bloated,” Beatrix said, glancing out the window.

“Our foot soldiers have not picked up any unrest from the streets. How can she be getting away with this, speaking so freely and amassing such a crowd in bars?”

“Beatrix, you know as well as I do it doesn’t take an entire city to start a coup d’etat.”

She paused and looked to Steiner with brown eyes that gleamed in the morning light. “And you know as well as I do we’d never let that happen. We’d never let it get to that point.”

“It’s already in motion,” Steiner said, pressing his hands to the table. “And Liam has unknowingly become a pawn in it all.”

Beatrix set her fork down and sat back in her chair. Steiner was not trying to alarm her. The captain watched as she stewed in her own thoughts, her face hard as stone. Beatrix, however, had to finally confront the words Zidane had been saying. Now with Steiner’s growing urgency, Beatrix had to reflect. The past four months of her life had been spent in a reclusive manner. Zidane and Steiner were seeing things first hand. And she had been missing it all. A weight came over her shoulders as she considered Garnet. She was in danger. And Beatrix’s

life was devoted to her. She placed her elbows to the table, gingerly tucking her hands beneath her chin.

“What do you suggest?” Steiner asked. “You’re the greatest war strategist on the continent.”

Beatrix’s eyelashes fluttered as she looked down, shaking her head. “If she intends to stampede the castle... we can’t act too soon or too quickly. We could alarm the citizens... or perhaps drive more to her cause if we bring it to light. We don’t want to cause anymore chaos than what’s already possible.”

“So... all we can do is wait?” Steiner’s shoulders slumped.

“We have to help Her Majesty,” Beatrix told him. “And we must be weary of Sir Liam.” Beatrix was about to open her mouth to say more when she started in her chair with a short gasp, pressing her hands to her belly. Steiner immediately came to his feet.

“What is it?” He asked, hurrying to her side. Beatrix grabbed his wrist, spreading his palm across her belly. After a moment, he smiled. “Amazing...”

“You know...” Beatrix said quietly, her eyes cast down. “It really is. There’s a life inside of me, Steiner.”

Steiner knelt beside Beatrix, placing his hand to her thigh. “Are you saying...?”

“It’s kind of bittersweet,” Beatrix looked to him as again the baby kicked. “With everything that’s happening now... after everything that’s happened period... I didn’t think I’d ever be capable of doing something like this. But... I have to do what’s right for this baby... *our* baby. I have to teach them, boy or girl, that you cannot spend your life afraid of it and the world around you. And I have to ensure this baby’s future by doing what is right by the Kingdom... for Her Majesty.”

Steiner’s smile only grew wider and he surged forward, encasing Beatrix in his large arms. She held onto him tenderly. “We’ll face this head on... *together*, Beatrix.” Steiner said through her thick hair. After a moment, he brought her backwards, holding onto her shoulders. “No more trying to do anything alone. We’re a team.”

Beatrix nodded, gripping his wrists. “You’re right, Steiner. I can’t do this without you.”

“And I cannot keep Alexandria safe without you.”



As the evening sun set, Zidane needed some time alone. His day with Garnet had been relatively normal besides her constant upbeat attitude. The worst parts were when they worked in silence and she would wonder aloud what Liam was up to, expressing her desire to see him. It only made Zidane's blood boil beneath his skin. How was he supposed to convince Garnet to eat a raw mint leaf? How long would he have to wait for her to have a headache to do that? For all he knew, she wouldn't have another headache until after she married the engineer. Zidane went to the far west wing of the garden, pulling his helmet from his head. He let out a huff as he listened to the trickling water. Carelessly, he tossed his helmet onto a bench and raked his hands through his hair, pacing around the circular courtyard. His boots scuffed against the cobblestone as he shook his head and crossed his arms over his chest. His chipped and unpolished armor gleamed in the evening light and the sky above had broken into swirls of oranges, pinks, and inky blues. He was sure Liam had already caught back up with Garnet. What was he going to do? Delta was right. He had no idea what they were planning. He didn't know when, how, and from where they'd all come from. Garnet was in no possible state to understand. He feared, though, there

wasn't enough time to release Garnet from her restraints before anything disastrous broke out.

He paused for a moment. A glint in the corner of his eye caught his attention and he cocked his head towards it. *Zidane Tribal. Hero of Prevailing Peace. 1783 — 1800.* Zidane's jaw clenched. What a stupid title, he thought to himself. He had done nothing to ensure any form of peace to carry out. His entire body was stiff and he couldn't seem to look away from this plaque. Was he even Zidane Tribal anymore? If he couldn't save his own friends, if he couldn't even help Garnet, then who was he really? There was a pressure building in Zidane as he unlatched the dagger from his belt. Using the hilt and grounding his teeth together, Zidane edged it against the plaque and pulled with all his might. He staggered backwards as the plaque freed from the rocky post. Zidane gripped it tightly in his hands before he turned towards the river. Without any hesitation, he threw it into the water and watched it splash and sink. He watched the rivers current continue on with no delay, his hands curled into fists.

"Sorry, Freya..." Zidane murmured, tilting his head back to look at the sky.

“Zeke, there you are!” Haagen came rushing into the courtyard in the next moment, pulling Zidane back into reality like emerging from cold water. “Hey, we need your help over at the gondola. Some irate vagrants used our boat to get onto the castle grounds and they’re refusing to leave.”

Zidane glanced towards the river once more before he nodded, scooping his helmet up from the bench. “Let’s go,” He said, without looking back at the now empty rock post. Together, they set out through the twisty garden and as they neared the sunken courtyard for the gondola, shouting could be heard over the hedges. Zidane and Haagen appeared at the top of the stairs to find Kohel and Laudo trying to reason with four men who were quite dingy and unwashed.

“The castle grounds are closed for the day, there is no loitering,” Kohel told them, holding his arms out. “You will be arrested for trespassing if you don’t get back on the gondola!”

“Well, then I’d have somewhere warm to sleep, at least, if I’m in the stocks!” One of them said with a raspy, tired voice.

“The jail cells here aren’t any better than what you can find back on the streets of Alexandria,”

Laudo countered.

“What’s going on here?” Zidane came down the stairs.

“Oh, look at all the soldiers you have to call just to make some men down on their luck feel less than human,” A vagrant scoffed.

“Look, this is just a matter of safety. No one from the city is allowed on castle grounds after four o’clock,” Zidane told them, holding his hands up. “This has nothing to do with who you are.”

“Look at how much room the queen has!” One exploded, making Laudo flinch. “She’s got enough rooms for all of us and she wouldn’t even know we’re ’ere! Why do I gotta sleep under a bridge when the queen’s got four different balconies to have tea on!?”

“Final warning, you have to leave,” Kohel said, pressing his hand to the hilt of his sword.

“Oh, and you want to use force ‘cause you’re scared of peasants!” A vagrant laughed heartily before he broke into a series of coughs. “If Queen Garnet says she loves her people as much as she does, have ’er open her dining room to us! We’re hungry and it’s gettin’ cold at nights!”

“Ah, screw it, Dante, they ain’t listening,” Another one raised his hand passively and only a beat passed before the man swung his fist. He caught Zidane off guard as he hooked him against his face. His helmet went clattering to the ground. Zidane gripped the ratty, patchy sleeves of the vagrant’s coat and they stumbled, spilling across the ground. The other vagrants leapt into action. Laudo let out a yelp as he was attacked. Kohel drew his sword.

“Kohel, no!” Zidane yelled as he struggled against the man whose hands desperately wanted to grip his neck. ‘Don’t use lethal force.’ With all his might, Zidane pushed against the man and they rolled. Unfortunately, the teetering stairs sent them for another tumble and the man landed on top of Zidane, pushing all the air from the young mans lungs. The vagrant grabbed his neck and slammed Zidane’s head against the edge of the concrete. The cool water of the river rushed against his head and down his neck. His fist then came across Zidane’s face. The moment he spit in Zidane’s eye, the soldier saw red. He surged forward, ramming the man up against the stairs and driving his knee against his ribcage. “What the hell is wrong with you?!”

The vagrant tried his best to push against Zidane, but he only pressed more weight against him.

“Ouch! Ouch! I gotta a bone to pick with Queen Garnet.”

Zidane looked to him intensely, his shoulders rising and falling. Around him, Kohel, Laudo, and Haagen had also contained the other wheezing, angry vagrants. Zidane grabbed the man’s coat, yanking him up. His dizzy head bobbed and there were practically stars in his eyes. “Why are you here? Who sent you?”

“I sent myself...!” The man said, letting out a cough. Zidane cringed away from him.

“Then what’s that bone you have to pick?” Zidane gave him another shake. “Queen Garnet can’t help people who don’t even want to help themselves. People always walkin’ around with their palm out, thinking the world owes them something. You think you’re the only person whose ever slept beneath a bridge or a dock? You think you’re the only hungry one?! Who or what made you get on that gondola and come here?”

The vagrant smiled with his cracked lips. “Wouldn’t you like to know? You’re not down enough on your luck to be privy to things like that.”

A flash of anger came over Zidane and he reared his fist back. It crunched against the man's cheekbone. He fell unconscious beneath Zidane. The young man was breathing heavily as he released the man's coat and he slumped awkwardly against the stairs. A black and blue bruise was forming on Zidane's right cheekbone. His lips were crusty with blood. He looked around himself again. The other soldiers were soundless as they held the vagrants close. They squirmed, hacked, and coughed. Everyone's eyes were filled with an anger and unmistakable sorrow. Zidane staggered to his feet, wiping the blood from his mouth. He could taste and smell copper.

"Take them to the stocks," Zidane said with a scratchy throat. "No bread and butter until someone starts talking."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

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### Chapter Twenty-Three

The incident at the gondola station was all the buzz amongst the Knights of Pluto and Squad Beatrix. Two days after it happened, the vagrants in the cold stocks still refused to open their mouths. They didn't even seem tempted with freshly baked bread and creamy butter. It had been a startling event that brought the question of public safety to mind. When Beatrix awoke that morning, something inside of her felt different. She felt almost normal. Like the person she had been a year ago. Slowly, she propped herself up in bed as the first inklings of daylight began to shed through the curtains. Beside her, Steiner's dark head was half-submerged beneath the covers. Beatrix took a moment to reflect, glancing around their room. What was different that morning? As if the world was ready to answer that thought, she felt a kick in her belly and slowly, she brought her hands up to curl around the bump. Was it acceptance, Beatrix wondered. Had she finally found the key? Though she'd never admit it, she had lost that key a few times in her life. Beatrix had endured countless bouts of self-doubt, riveting anxiety, and



absolute frustration. She had spent her years building mirrors around herself to always portray a consistent outlying persona. But inside, the general had stewed with confliction and darkness. Now she found herself at a form of peace. Her worry seemed less apparent. She felt as if she had a clear objective of what she had to do.

Carefully, she pulled herself from bed to not disturb Steiner. Beatrix dressed deftly in their narrow washing quarters, being mindful to not ram her elbows into the walls. She dressed in a form of her general's outfit with her silver flowing bodice cape and dark maroon leggings. Beatrix paused to look at herself in the mirror. She hadn't worn her general's outfit the entire season of summer. Slowly, her eyes fell to the bump jutting out from what used to be her slender body. It was all still quite foreign to Beatrix, but she took in a deep breath, willing herself to be as brave as she used to think she was. She couldn't be afraid, she told herself. She just had to confront the world as she currently was. It was chilly outside when Beatrix left her barracks, so she pulled a light woolen coat on that sported the crest of Alexandria on the breast pocket and right arm. Beatrix walked with a distinct purpose across the garden. The familiar barracks of Squad Beatrix

began to rise over the hedges. Instead of being painted a moody brown with no flair like the Knights of Pluto, the Squad Beatrix barracks were welcoming with its red shingled roof, matching shutters, and white exterior. Beatrix paused on the porch steps and glanced around the quiet and lonesome garden. After a moment, she took a deep breath, pushing the door open.

Her squad was already dressed, though no ones hair had been swept back to jam into a helmet quite yet. They sat at the large dining room table to the right of the entrance, where they had toast, orange juice, tea, and fruit. Upon seeing the general, chairs and benches scraped backwards and they all came to attention, their faces barren of make up and their hair wet from showers, curling around their shoulders. Her squad tried their hardest to remain unmoving beneath Beatrix's sight, but it was easy to see their eyes slowly falling to the large bump protruding from her body. Beatrix did her best to remain confident before her team. Just like she used to be.

“At ease,” Beatrix's voice was clear and even. She came through the wide archway of the dining room, glancing back and forth at her crew. ‘We have several things to do in the wake of the public

disturbance that happened on these castle grounds just the other day. Inez will be part of that effort in bringing the standard of our training upwards. This morning, however, I would like to speak with Delta and Felicia.’ Beatrix’s curls beat against her shoulder as she looked about. “Where are they?”

Shira cleared her throat, glancing towards her comrades. “They quit, General.”

“What? When?” Beatrix furrowed her brow. “Why was I not informed of this?”

“Captain Steiner told us not to disturb you,” Inez saluted.

“When did they quit?” Beatrix arched her eyebrows. Inside her chest, she suddenly felt a weight. And all of Zidane’s words were barraging her.

“The day before the public disturbance,” Shira told her.

Beatrix was quiet in that moment and unmoving. Her dark eyes darted between each face of her loyal soldiers. Things were slowly beginning to make more and more sense. Beatrix crossed her arms over her chest and paced a few steps. The timing couldn’t have been more exacting, either. She pursed her lips

and drew in a small breath, pulling her shoulders up. All she could hear were Zidane's words, his raspy, worried voice, his exhaustion. Beatrix didn't want to admit he was right. She wanted to believe everything was a coincidence or seen wrongly through their tired eyes. Beatrix wanted to say everything was under control because she couldn't stand to not be in control. She wanted to trust everything was fine again. After all, they had fought so hard to make it so. But with two sudden unaccounted for soldiers and everything Zidane had tallied up, Beatrix could only shake her head.

"Dammit..." She muttered.

"General?" Inez kept her hand at attention.

Beatrix's eyelashes fluttered and she could only manage another shake of the head. "Not important. Squad Beatrix, are you listening?"

"Yes, General!" Came the resounding voice of her team.

Beatrix paced before them. Her fears from that morning, the anxiety surrounding and gravitating towards her growing belly, had completely dissipated. Greater things were among them. "Today, tomorrow, the next day, all the way into

next week, it will be nothing but training. We need to look our finest and draw our swords equally. I will not allow my good name to be squandered due to any lacking on this team, am I clear?" She looked amongst the silent and alert women. "We will practice our parries, our strafes... this castle is under lock down until further notice. We must protect our queen in these uncertain times. Is that understood?"

"Yes, General!"

"The Knights of Pluto may have been caught off-guard, but we will not," Beatrix continued. "We've been through strange times, ladies. Many phases of uncertainty, at that. But Alexandria must never flounder beneath our sacred oaths. We don't know how to place the events that have transpired, but we certainly cannot underestimate or forget them. We must work around the clock to perfect our timing, our drawings — everything we do is for the Queen and the safety of our people. We must not forget what we have promised ourselves to— what we continually strive for. That is briskness, utmost importance, and a tender care that only a woman with shiny steel can attain. We will run, we will march— we will not rest if there is unrest in our community. Do I have your support, ladies?"

“Yes, General!”

“Good,” Beatrix nodded, poising her hands behind her back. “Are there questions before I assign you?”

There was a silence in the barracks. The steam rose from the tea. The toast remained uneaten. The soldiers slowly looked between each other with their heavy hanging wet hair. Finally, Shira drew her shoulders back. “General Beatrix, if I may inquire...”

“About this?” Beatrix held her hand towards her round belly. Shira’s lips nearly drew into her as if she’d bitten a sour lemon. “You needn’t worry about it anymore, girls. I am back in charge, without a moment to spare. That is, until late spring. That’s all there is to know.”

“Yes, General!” The girls all saluted crisply. Beatrix took the moment to inspect them as sharply as she used to in past days. Finally, she nodded in acceptance.

“Inez, I’ll check back later,” Beatrix said. “First shift, you’re up. The rest, you’re in training. There is no down time, is that understood?”

“Yes, General!” Their voices rang out in unison and the General relished in the sound of uniformity and camaraderie that she realized she had been starved of and missed greatly.

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When Zidane awoke that morning, he felt choked. His throat pulsed horrendously. His head was as heavy as lead. His eyes even felt swollen. Zidane’s head lolled on his shoulders as he dragged himself to the edge of his bed at the first break of dawn. His mind spun as he gripped the edge of his cot. Zidane’s neck felt no more supportive than a paper straw. His clammy hands grabbed hold of the edge of the wash basin and he staggered into the porcelain, looking up towards the dusty mirror. His eyes burned with an intense red and darkened sockets, as if he hadn’t gotten a wink of sleep last night. He waxed and waned between hot and cold and his throat ignited like fire. Zidane let out a raspy cough as he turned the faucet on, desperately splashing cold water against his sticky face. He let out an uneven sigh as he ran his wet palm down the back of his neck. He hadn’t felt so rough in quite some time. Not since he’d had the flu when he was fourteen. He cleared his sore throat and again

washed his face, but the sweat kept coming back, plaguing his flushed skin.

Zidane let out a long sigh as he pulled his damp shirt off, seating himself on the edge of his bed. In that moment, Baku's voice reached his ears. *Orange juice*, he had insisted. *You lanky boy! You need vitamins! The good kind!* Somewhat painfully, Zidane re-dressed in a fresh white shirt and khakis and wandered out into the hallway, feeling something like a zombie. He desperately wanted to crawl back into bed but he knew he couldn't. Not when his nerves were so pricked, his anxiety at record highs. There was no time for rest, no matter how much his body temperature spiked or his body begged for a break. His boots clunked against the stairs and his shoulder came against the wall as he rounded the corner, gazing into the dining hall.

"Guys... do we have orange juice...?" Zidane's hoarse voice rang out. He blinked his sore, tired eyes, realizing Haagen, Kohel, and Laudo were at the table, slumped and in just as bad shape. Haagen held a hot water bag to his head. Kohel's head hung in his hands, his forehead nearly touching the table. Laudo was laying across a bench with his arm thrown across his eyes. They sorely turned their eyes on Zidane. The young man pursed his lips together



tightly as he felt beads of sweat forming on the nape of his neck. “You’re all sick, too?”

“I woke up at two... wasn’t able to go back to sleep,” Haagen replied with the same voice that exuded a raspy exhaustion. He rubbed the bag against his sticky forehead.

“These are the times I wish my mother was here...” Laudo heaved a heavy sigh from the bench. His skin was pale and wet, his lips parched. “She made the best chicken noodle soup... even in the worst deliriums, it’d bring you back to solid, healthy ground...”

Zidane came into the dining hall and eased himself into a chair, reaching for the pitcher of water. He drank it desperately.

“Not too fast,” Kohel told him, lifting his heavy head. “I’ve already been sick from all the water sloshing around in my stomach.”

Zidane rubbed at his pulsating head. He wanted the ache to go away, but what could help? The bread and jam on the table looked absolutely repulsive. The longer Zidane’s eyes fixated on the clumpy peach jam, the more his stomach constricted and threatened to come up his throat. He slumped in his

chair, using his shirt to wipe the sweat away again. His darkened eyes looked between Kohel and Haagen. “Do you guys normally get sick right before the first frost of winter?”

“I never get sick,” Haagen told him, setting the chilling water bag on the table. He let out an airy cough, pounding a fist to his chest as if to exhume all the nastiness inside of him. “Only one around here who ever gets sick is Mullenkedheim.”

“That’s ’cause he’s not afraid to buy oysters from anywhere,” Kohel countered, barely able to keep his head lifted.

“Do we have any mint leaves?” Laudo asked from where he still laid hidden beneath the table. The room was spinning around him in a hot mess.

“That won’t do anything for the fever, it’s an old wives tale,” Haagen said.

Zidane let out a sigh, tilting his head back to look at the ceiling. His eyes followed the knots in the wood as a means to distract himself from the inferno rising up inside of him. It felt like every part of him was on fire, but he still craved the security and comfort of a blanket. Each throb of blood pulsating through his head felt like a hammer landing on top

of him. His stomach swished every direction like a relentless sea in a hurricane. He had once been a sickly child in his early youth with Tantalus. He was usually fraught with low grade fevers and exhaustion. Baku always chalked it up to him being a thin, lanky boy. But Zidane understood now, it was because everything on Gaia was so foreign to him. But he couldn't understand in that moment why he was so ill. What had he eaten? Where had he been? Slowly, though, his sore eyes looked over the other fevered soldiers and his tired mind began to churn.

“Son of a bitch...” His rocky voice muttered. Kohel looked to Zidane.

“Sorry?”

“The peasants,” Zidane sat forward, placing his hands to the table.

“What about 'em?” Haagen asked, cradling his head against his palms. “They're still in the stocks on their little hunger strike.”

“Who else has interacted with them?” Zidane furrowed his brow. The sweat on the nape of his neck was irksome.

“Just us and Captain Steiner,” Haagen told him. The soldier paused for a moment and drew his

shoulders back. “Do you think... they’re ill, too?”

“At least carrying something,” Zidane shook his head, but stopped when he felt his brain bouncing against his skull. “They live on the streets and sleep in the elements. And they were all coughing and hacking up a lung when we arrested them.”

Laudo finally sat up, his wiry shoulders sagging. “You don’t think Captain Steiner is sick, too?”

“God, I hope not,” Kohel said. “It would not be good for General Beatrix and her condition.”

Zidane fell against the back of his chair again, crossing his arms over his chest. A different intense heat was burning inside of him now as he recalled the altercation from the previous days. *You’re not down enough on your luck to be privy to things like that.* He ground his teeth together as Astrid’s face filled his mind. “We’ve been duped.”

“What are you talking about?” Haagen sighed, dipping his head.

“It’s the fever talking,” Laudo declared.

“Something bad is about to happen,” Zidane told them, his voice cracking as his throat seared. “And we fell right into someone else’s plan.”

“Zeke, you’re not making any sense. We all need to lay back down,” Kohel said.

“We can’t leave the crew down four men,” Haagen shook his head. “They’ll never accomplish all the daily tasks so short handed.”

“I can’t climb the stairs today,” Laudo collapsed against the table, making some silverware jump. “Surely we’re entitled to *one* sick day.”

Zidane came to his feet, tugging at his shirt as it stuck uncomfortably to his torso. He let out a sigh and rolled his shoulders. He was already exhausted just standing up and he used the table for support, blinking his dry eyes rapidly. “I’m going to talk to the Captain.” In the next moment, however, they heard whistling and the clunk of heavy boots against the stairs. Just a beat passed before Breireicht appeared in the sprawling archway, swinging a set of keys on his finger. He paused and furrowed his brow, looking over the scene in front of him. It didn’t take long for him to stagger back, pulling his shirt up over his mouth and nose.

“Oh no! Not the plague! I’ve survived one, I don’t wanna do it again!”

“It’s not the plague,” Zidane sighed, sagging his shoulders. “It’s just the flu, Breireicht.”

“How can you be so sure?!” The assistant captain looked bewildered. “Last I checked, you were a soldier, not a doctor.”

“Then go get the doctor!” Zidane’s voice rose but then faltered as he fell into a coughing fit. Breireicht looked at them as if they’d all been possessed. Once the coughing subsided, Zidane cleared his throat. “And get the Captain, too, while you’re at it.”

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In the dining hall that morning, the late autumn sun filled the room which glowed in all its polished majesty. Garnet was quiet as she spread the cream cheese across her toast. Across the table, Liam collected grapes and raspberries, all the while stealing glances at the Queen. Even when doing something so simple and unexciting, she was mesmerizing. That shimmering long black hair. Her olive complexion, so clear and smooth. Her full lashes that encased her chocolate eyes. She was quite a sight to behold and still, it struck the young engineer as fascinating that the girl in the bar bore such a resemblance. As his father had always said,

however, there's someone out there who looks just like you. Garnet felt his eyes and looked up, offering a smile to him as she gently placed her cutlery on her plate.

"It was chilly this morning," Garnet told him with her velvet voice. "For the first time this morning, the fire in the mantle was quite welcomed. I love the cooler weather."

"Me, too," Liam agreed, reaching for the pitcher of orange juice. "It makes working in the airship bay a bit more manageable. And there's something magical about the first snowfall."

"Imagine we make a snowman in the garden," Garnet grinned widely and it's like Liam's entire universe was shining at him.

He popped a grape into his mouth, pointing his finger towards the Queen. "Now that is a marvelous idea, my love."

Garnet couldn't remember the last time she was so happy and bubbly to be around someone. The past year had been hard for her and she had dove head first into her piles of work as a monarch. She pined in recluse, licking her wounds and suffering in silence all alone. Deep inside of her, she still felt

confusion. But it never came to the surface or interrupted her thoughts anymore. The young woman wondered if that's what acceptance and moving on actually looked like. Garnet couldn't say she understood everything she felt or why things had happened as they did, but she couldn't ignore the blossoming adoration she felt for Liam. It felt like love to her. Like a switch had been flipped and all the lights came up to point her in a meaningful direction in her life. She wasn't doomed to be all alone after all. And perhaps the love she had felt before wasn't true. It hadn't been her once in a life time opportunity. Her dreams had calmed like the garden after a downpour. The fog had ascended from the moat that surrounded her mind. She would always question the meaning of life and all its happenings, but she couldn't argue things were finally working in her favor after missing so many strokes. After a year and a half, Garnet felt as if she could relax again and return to the girl inside of her that she thought had been lost.

“So,” Liam reached for his own toast now, opting for plum jam. “What’s on the agenda for you today?”

“Well, it’s the beginning of the week, so that means the parcel delivery has come,” Garnet tilted



her head as she lifted her toast to take a dainty bite. “However... I didn’t see Zeke this morning. He’s usually standing right outside my door for a short debrief before we meet in the private study. I wonder where he is...”

Liam focused on his breakfast, reflecting on the last interaction he had with the soldier. He had been quite direct and angry. Liam worried maybe he was privy to something, but he pushed it aside, shaking his head. “I’m sure he will turn up, sweetheart. You’ve raved about his service. Certainly he was just tied up with other affairs.”

“You’re right,” Garnet nodded. “He is the best of the best for the Knights of Pluto. I’m sure whatever Steiner needs, he consults Zeke.”

Liam jabbed his butter knife into the cream cheese, looking across the table at Garnet. “What do you know about this great soldier? I don’t know him well and I’ve been a guest for so long.”

“Just that he hails from Lindblum, like you,” Garnet replied, reaching for the ramekin of raspberries. “He used to be an artist. He lost his family in his youth. Zeke never takes his helmet off because apparently he received a great facial wound

during the war. I feel bad he is so embarrassed, especially taking into account my throne's doings..."

The engineer was quiet for a moment, letting the Queen's words sink into him. A facial wound? Liam could hear the squeak of his helmets grate as it was brought up to reveal his intense blue eyes. His complexion had been so smooth. He looked young, maybe Garnet's age. But there were no signs of any damage or war scars. Liam furrowed his brow, pressing grapes into his mouth with an absent mind. Zeke was just as mysterious and marvelous as the young woman in the bar. And their presence in his life left Liam perplexed. Quickly, though, he roused from his thoughts and reached across the table to touch Garnet's slender wrist. "My love, you know no one blames you for what happened before you ascended the throne. Zeke does not blame you, either."

Garnet grinned lightly. "Your reassurance means the world to me, Liam. I only wish it did the same for Zeke."

She returned to breakfast, as did Liam. However, the young man found himself even more confused about their encounter and intrigued as to what the promising young soldier had to hide.

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“Doctor, Captain, you’ll want these,” Breireicht said as they approached the porch of the soldiers barracks. He held out two cloth masks. The assistant captain already donned his across the lower half of his face. ‘They’re in bad shape. They seem to be quite ill. I’m worried I’ve already had too much contact myself.’ The doctor and Steiner collected their masks and worked on fixing them around their ears. “It’s really bad, Doc.” The nervous man continued. “They’re pale, clammy, and damp with sweat. High temperatures, dry coughs, fatigue... I’m afraid it’s the plague.”

The doctor laughed heartily despite the bleak feeling overtaking Breireicht. He gave his mask a good tug to secure it snugly and pat the soldier on the shoulder in his paternal ways. “Oh, Breireicht, you needn’t worry about that! The plague has been gone for some time and unless one of your soldiers were bitten by a rat, I do not believe that’s a concern of ours. The first frost is upon us, and with that, so is the flu.” In the next moment, he reached into his satchel and pulled a steno pad free. He dabbed his quill into a vial of ink, stepping into the shade of the porch. The boards creaked beneath his feet as he

blocked the entrance. “Now, for my notes... how many soldiers are affected?”

“Four,” Breireicht told him.

“Who?” Steiner asked, a worried feeling coming over him.

“Laudo, Haagen, Kohel, and Zeke.”

Steiner drew his lips together. Zidane was ill? Steiner wondered briefly for his own health before he turned his eyes upwards at the barracks. He could only feel an impending doom come upon him. He and Beatrix had met briefly in the garden just an hour before. Delta and Felicia were gone without a trace. And now with the current predicament, the captain couldn't help but feel uneasy. For all of the summer season, he had tried to tread ahead on Zidane's worries and fears. He didn't want to think things could unravel as they once had. Steiner wanted to believe that chapter of chaos had closed. And yet, another chapter seemed to be written quite soon. It was all crashing in on Steiner, like foamy waves against jagged rocks. All the bits and pieces Zidane had picked up were falling into place, just as he had cried about. Now, it all seemed too real and the captain worried about the sanctity of Alexandria.

Tricks were coming to the surface. Deceit had made its face once again.

The doctor made a punctual dot in his notes before peering up again. “They were all perfectly fine yesterday?”

“Today is the first signs of illness,” Breireicht nodded.

“And these soldiers, what have been their shifts and tasks for the past four days?”

“Well, the same as usual,” The assistant captain shrugged with a deep fear. “They patrol the gardens, the castle, service the gondola station...”

“But there was an altercation at the gondola station, no?” The doctor lowered his note and briskly ran his hand along his bushy mustache.

“Yes, but...” Breireicht furrowed his brow. “That was a routine arrest for trespassing.”

“And who exactly did they arrest?” The medical professional arched his bushy eyebrows and dabbed his quill into his vial of ink. “I’ll need to know for sampling, naturally. We cannot know the true cause until I do my own check-up.”

“Just some peasants.”

“*Just some peasants!*” The doctor echoed with a hearty laugh despite the grim predicament. His quill scratched wildly across his pad as he shook his head. “My dear sir, street vagrants carry *numerous* diseases and ailments. They’re all just so used to the grubby floor and rusty bins that it stops affecting them! It seems your fine soldiers have been afflicted by the illness of the streets.”

“But is it treatable?” Steiner asked, feeling a clammy anxiety pucker across his skin. He pulled at the mask hugging his face with a near fright.

The doctor packed his notes and quill away soundly into his satchel. “Well, of course, Captain Steiner. As long as no one has the mumps, indubitably!” The doctor pressed his mask flat against his bushy mustache and nodded towards the worried men at the base of the porch steps. ‘Give me a few moments to inspect the clients. I assume the vagrants are in the stocks?’ The Captain and Assistant Captain could only manage unhinged nods. “Excellent. Many of these men may have had mumps as children and that will make my job easier! Otherwise, you can expect these men on bed rest for the remainder of the week.” And with that, without a fear, the doctor slipped through the forsaken door.

“A whole week!?” Breireicht shook his head. ‘Captain, being short four men will surely make a difference. Especially with Zeke and his commitments.’ Steiner was quiet as his dark eyes looked towards the towering castle amongst the hedges of the garden. “Captain!?” Breireicht seemed nearly panicked. Steiner himself was in turmoil. He adjusted his gloves slowly, swallowing any manic thoughts that passed his mind. He channeled Beatrix in that moment, wishing for her graceful thinking to come upon him. It didn’t, so he bit his tongue.

“Make it work,” Steiner told him bluntly before he took off in a jog, his armor rattling the whole way.

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The cicadas chirped brightly that night. The grass was wet and squishy beneath Astrid’s boots as she pressed through the unkempt bushes and low hanging tree branches. Her black cloak wavered back and forth, her fishtail braid falling over her shoulder. Through the thicket of twigs and leaves, the milky moonlight spilled down onto her. Her gloved hands curled into fists. Her bold brow was furrowed, her face hard as rock as she gazed over the tall mossy stone fence at the massive

Alexandrian Castle that glinted beneath the full moons presence. Astrid's dark eyes hopped balcony to balcony, swinging from one balustrade to the next, soaking in the detail of the bricks and towers. It was meant to be all hers and finally, it seemed her destiny was being realized, just as her mother had always promised her. From behind Astrid, she heard the the damp grass shifting and and branches moved aside as a wall of people appeared shoulder to shoulder. Many were grimy and sore looking from a rough day at work. Soot stained clothes and articles with mediocre patches were the normal attire. Together, they made a unified front behind Astrid, equipped with torches, pitch forks, axes, spears, and whatever makeshift things they could imagine. They held the same light in their eyes as Astrid carefully looked outward to the edges of castle's property. After a moment, two orange lights from the northern and eastern side walls could be seen and she grinned. Everyone was in place.

Her heart rate accelerated as she nodded to a crewmen who lifted his own torch in signal. "Alright, this is it," Astrid said, her breath puffing out before her in the moonlight. 'The first frost is upon us and so is our retribution. After so much careful planning, we can finally exact what we want,



what we've always been entitled to.' She looked over her confident team. "Of course, nothing will go on without a fight. Blood will be spilled and violence will rage up into the night sky, but we cannot be afraid of taking what is ours. I cannot promise everyone will survive, but rest assured, once we remove Queen Garnet from the throne, you will all be immortalized as heroes of Alexandria. Not a single person's name here will be forgotten. That is a promise I will take to my own grave." She reached towards her belt, brandishing a shiny sword. "Tonight, ladies and gentleman, we rewrite history in favor of the commoner. This is for the people!" The team raised their weapons in camaraderie, letting out hoots. Astrid grinned and turned back towards the castle, holding her sword out, as if aiming directly for Queen Garnet's private chambers. She had memorized the floor plan Delta and Felicia had dutifully drawn out for her. She knew exactly what to do, where to go, where to be. She took in a deep breath, thinking fleetingly of her mother, before she nodded to herself. "On my signal."

## Chapter Twenty-Four

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### Chapter Twenty-Four

The doctor's best diagnosis was indeed the flu. While relieved it wasn't the mumps, Zidane was irritated by his current reality of being confined to bed. He had failed to get any rest the entire day, instead watching as the shadows slanted across his room as sunlight waned on. The short spurts of fevered naps he fell in and out of were turbulent and anxiety inducing. He woke up stickier, his heart thumping in his chest, with each snooze. Every dream was different but they all shared one similarity: Garnet. She was always there in some form or fashion. Sometimes she was across a wide, raging river. Other times, she was surrounded by flames. He could hear her voice as she called his name and yet, he was powerless to reach her. Zidane's entire body felt like cement in the dreams. He couldn't move or use his voice. He was doomed to stand there and watch her go through the motions of his discombobulated thoughts. Zidane saw her in a variety of ways. Sometimes, she looked exactly as she had when they had traveled together. In one dream, of a balmy spring day where the moon and

sun shared the sky, Garnet was dressed in her regal attire of the throne. She'd run, she'd cry, she'd collapse to her knees. All Zidane could do was stand there and watch as his imagination overtook her, dragging her through the ground and swallowing her up. They only became more and more real for the ill young man as he writhed and twisted in his bed, watching again as Garnet called out for him with a moon of fire licking over her shoulders. She was so close, yet so far away. It was the story of his life.

However, the sharp sound of a brass bell had Zidane bolting upright in his cot. The pillow was nearly glued to him with sweat and tumbled to the ground. Bells were signaling everywhere. He realized it was late into the night now. Instantly, his heart rate accelerated and he staggered from bed to peer out the window. Using his shirt, he ran hurried circles against the dewy glass, peering into the garden towards the castle. He couldn't see much, but noticed an awful lot of commotion and the running shadows of several torches. He furrowed his brow as he nearly saw stars with his fevered head. Zidane looked over his shoulder towards his bedroom door as he heard several sets of boots against the floorboards.

“We’re under attack!” Came a yell. “All men to the grounds! This is not a drill!”

Zidane’s breathing shallowed and he looked back out the window, spotting a couple men slinking around the hedges, armed with shovels and chipped axes. It was happening. All of his fears had leapt from his head and were manifesting directly in front of him. In that moment, his mind was overcome with a whirlwind of memories. He saw flashes of Astrid in their youth with the steam of street vendors puffing behind her. He saw her with her cheeky grin, poised against the grimy wall of an alleyway. And he remembered the glint of that damned garnet necklace he had foolishly gifted to her instead of pawning for a pretty coin. The sweat plaguing his body grew cold. A pound at the door caused him to hunch his shoulders and he turned to see Weimar bursting in, fumbling with getting his helmet straight on his head.

“Good, you’re still alive! Get geared up, this is an emergency!” Weimar told him. ‘We have to secure the Queen immediately.’ Zidane felt like a Chocobo caught in a torchlight. “Zeke, come on! We don’t have any time to spare! There are dozens, maybe even a hundred men, flooding the castle grounds right now!” Zidane rushed to his small wardrobe and

with sticky hands began shrugging his chest plate on and staggering into his greaves. His breath was uneven as he viciously fought with all the annoying belts. The bells in the background pounded against his very skull. Behind Weimar, soldiers rushed by. Some had their swords, while others had called upon the large battle axes and even maces that typically collected dust in a closet. Zidane let out a wheezy cough as he snagged his helmet, smashing it over his head. He then grabbed his sword and followed Weimar out, thundering down the stairs.

Beyond the large bay windows of the lounge room and dining hall, there was lots of noise and flashes of orange glowing lights. Zidane already felt the ugly head of fatigue reigning over him but he pushed the barrack doors open, emerging to a scene of whizzing chaos. Darkened features darted between the columns of the hedges. The sound of clashing steel could be heard, along with hollers and screams. Zidane's breath shallowed and he heard his blood coursing through his ears as he took it all in. He looked to the towering Alexandrian Castle with pursed lips. *Dagger...*

"Watch out!" Weimar cried, brandishing his sword.

Zidane felt sluggish but drew his sword from his belt deftly, narrowly meeting the edge of an ax. The man wielding it was sooty with a mess of curls a top his head. Zidane ground his teeth together as he pushed him off. The bulky man staggered on the steps for a moment before Weimar came forward, sending a slash against his thigh. The man let out an ugly cry and reared his elbow up, sharply nailing Weimar in the jaw. The soldier tumbled down the stairs, spitting blood across the cobblestone. Zidane gasped sharply, bringing his sword up as the angry man swung his ax with all his might. Zidane's own weapon dug into his palm as he pushed against the enemy. His gloves were just beginning to give into the blade when a heavy conk rang out. Zidane lifted his flushed face and watched as his attackers eyes spun in his head before he collapsed awkwardly against the stairs. Behind him, Steiner stood poised with an iron lantern cage in his hands.

“Zidane, you have to get to the castle, I'll cover you,” Steiner told him. “You have to get Her Majesty into the northern bunker and secure—”

“Look out!” Zidane's raspy voice rang out as he stuffed his hand against Steiner's helmet, jerking him down. A moment later, a flaming arrow struck directly into the wooden beam of the porch and the

fire erupted violently, sending embers down onto the crouching men. Weimar sorely adjusted his helmet, propping himself up on his elbow. His bloody mouth was agape as the fire hungrily began to crawl all over the barracks. Zidane let out a wheezy cough and came back to his feet, looking up and down the long aisles of chaos. His fraying gloves gripped the hilt of his sword tightly.

“Weimar, follow Zidane, with haste! To the castle!” Steiner scrambled to his feet and cringed as the heat of the flames licked against his skin. He grabbed Weimar, who sloppily came to his feet with stars still gathering in his view. Everything was so disorienting. People were screaming. The thunderous sounds of boots came from all directions. And the garden was slowly but surely descending further into chaos with the clanking sound of steel and flickering orange lights. Hoots and hoorahs echoed everywhere.

Weimar seemed disoriented as he looked to the captain. “Zidane? Who the hell is that?”

Steiner ground his teeth together. “Follow your orders!”

In the next moment, Weimar and Steiner parted as a javelin was jabbed between them, streaking off

the sides of their armors in nail-biting squeals. Zidane wasted no time coming forward. He slashed his sword upward, letting out a yell of exertion. The end of the javelin clattered to the ground and the rugged looking man wasted no time twirling the jagged pole out, striking Zidane in the shoulder. The young man staggered and went into another fit of coughs. Weimar's own sword came out from the side, digging straight into the man's side. He instantly paled as the crimson blood gushed from his clothes. Zidane's skin was sticky, his eyes wide, as he watched enough blood drain to make him crumple.

“Zidane, Weimar, run!” Steiner howled as another wave of rag-tag bandits rounded the corner. Behind them, the barracks was consumed in flames, slowly charring away to ash that began to lift into the cold autumn air and sprinkle across the garden. Zidane's breath nearly clogged all his hearing but he glanced towards the castle with a racing heart. He grabbed Weimar's elbow and together the men took off. Zidane looked over his shoulder one last time, his dark bangs sticking to his forehead, as he watched Steiner draw his sword without a fear or tremor in sight.



Together, Zidane and Weimar pumped their arms and slung their swords without regards to training. The garden around them was in absolute chaos but the trail they ran was dark and unoccupied. Weimar tilted the grate of his helmet up as they rounded a corner. They stopped short, however, and did a pivot on the balls of their feet to continue west when they saw a scene of fighting. They jogged further into the night and ash was becoming more apparent as bushes, rose petals, and small quarter barracks continued to burn.

“Who the hell is Zidane...!?” Weimar asked, adjusting his sword in his hand. ‘Isn’t that the old hero who died!? Captain Steiner can’t expect us to protect his memorial! Zeke, we gotta go to the cas—’ “The two men screeched to a stop as another scene of madness descended upon them. Squad Beatrix was facing several men with torches, molotov cocktails, and pitchforks. Zidane pulled Weimar back, motioning him to get down. Together, they clung against the slate gray brick of the hedges, their breaths coming out as heavy pants. Zidane looked around for an opening. The castle was so close. The light pooling from the large doors was noticeable. Zidane didn’t want to imagine the havoc being thrown beneath those tall vaulted ceilings. Weimar

grabbed his arm, pulling him from all his fevered thoughts and worry.” What the hell is going on?!’ Zidane tilted his head for a moment and pulled his helmet off to allow the pulsating heat to escape into the frigid night. Zidane looked between the darkness surrounding them and pressed his lips together. “Queen Garnet may have loved him, but I don’t love him enough to protect his plaque! We gotta get to the Queen and secure her!” Zidane sighed and tilted his head down as his nerves grated against every fiber of his being. “Zeke, what’s the plan!? Disobey Captain Steiner or find the —”

“I *am* Zidane,” He lifted his tired, glazed eyes to look at Weimar. The soldier crumpled back for a moment.

“What are you talking about?” Weimar furrowed his brow. “It’s just the fever and adrenaline talkin’, Zeke. Come on.”

Zidane let out an irritated sigh and drooped his head, his dark bangs dangling in front of him. He ground his teeth together. He missed his blond hair. He missed himself. He was so close, at least, he thought he was. But a deep seated anger was blossoming in the pit of his belly. Every memory he had run away from was catching up quickly. It

flooded through his eyes and his muscles curled. All of it was assaulting his senses — he didn't know whether he was looking at Astrid or Garnet as they blurred together in a whirlwind of a messy tornado.

“Never mind,” Zidane shook his head, pulling his helmet back on.

Weimar was opening his mouth to reply when a glass bottle shattered in front of them, sending sparks and flames everywhere. The two soldiers howled and scattered out into the opening, joining a few of Squad Beatrix as they squared off against men with pick axes and hammers. Zidane was clonked against his helmet and his mind spun, the metal crumpling inward to his head. He was quick to react, though, going into a kneel and using his sword to cut the man's calves. He whined in complaint and staggered as Weimar delivered another slash across his forearms. Blood was gushing everywhere. Even Shira and Inez were covered in crusty crimson, their own arms and thighs bleeding. The blood curling screams echoed against Zidane's aching skull as he rolled out of the way of a pick ax that lodged into the cobblestone. The bandit let out a grunt as he attempted to tug his weapon free. Shira reached towards her belt and with lightning reflexes, threw a

small dagger that found itself in the arm of the tall man.

“You *bitch!*” He roared, giving up on his pick ax. He ripped the dagger from his arm, uncaring of the blood oozing down his bracers. He swung with all his might, catching the back of Inez’s shoulder as she fended off a man with a lantern. She let out a breathy cry and staggered forward, leaving herself open. Zidane darted in, using his hip to ram Inez out of the way. The heavy iron lantern cage collided with his chest, denting his armor even more.

“Zeke, you have to get to the castle!” Shira yelled, tilting the grate of her helmet up. “We have you covered, go!”

“But—” Zidane’s raspy voice rang out and he lifted his eyes in time to see Shira’s own throwing knife come back to collide with her right shoulder. “I’m not leaving you guys behind!”

“Zeke, the Queen!” Weimar reminded him, bringing his sword up to graze off the flying lantern cage. “Go! I’ll keep Inez and Shira safe!”

In the next moment, large burly arms reached around Zidane, lifting him up. Uselessly, his wrist pivoted and swung his sword to no avail. The

grotesque smell of someone's hot breath evaded his senses and Zidane was certain he'd lose all of his meek dinner of hot broth and corn bread. "The Queen, eh? Why don't you take me to 'er? I got a few words, if you don't mind." Zidane squirmed and wheezed as the embrace became tighter. His armor dug into his skin. "It's amazing the Queen thinks you puny little humans can stop us, born and bred from the streets. There's hundreds of us and only dozens of you!" He guffawed, only squeezing Zidane tighter. The man's awful breath was beginning to make his headache more pronounced. In the blink of an eye, however, Zidane felt the wet stickiness of blood against his cheek and looked with wide eyes at the face beside him that now had a large sword running through the eye socket. It was slow motion for Zidane, his breath shallowed, as the bandit began to fall over. The glint of rubies embedded in steel flashed across Zidane's vision as he tumbled to the ground. When he lifted his head, he saw Beatrix across the plaza.

"Zidane, run!" Beatrix screeched, darting forward. She pressed her boot to the limp chest of the man, extracting her sword from his head. Her round belly swung around as she checked the perimeters. 'Go! Are you deaf?!' Zidane scrambled

to his feet, taking one last glance at the scene before him. Billowing smoke, rampant flames, raining ash. It was all so surreal. His blood was throbbing in his ears. “Run and don’t stop! Find Her Majesty!”

Zidane looked to Beatrix for a brief moment. Her hair was windblown, her cheeks rosy. Bits of ashes clung to her curls. Zidane’s heart twisted in his chest. But Beatrix lifted her arm as signal and Zidane nodded to her, hopeful it wouldn’t be the last time he saw her. Despite his aching body’s protest, Zidane darted from the scene of chaos. He kept low with high knees as he focused on the shadows to help his cause. Through the bushes, he heard swords coming down and all kinds of objects resounding in resistance. Zidane clung to the sides of the garden, pausing as more burly men rushed by. The castle was near now, with its warm orange glow illuminating the gray cobblestone path. Zidane paused in the darkness and tilted his head back.

He had to find Garnet.

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When the bells rang out, Garnet was roused from her sleep with a deep fear penetrating her. She hadn’t heard those cursed brass bells in nearly two

years. Her skin immediately puckered and her nightgown clung to her. Beside her, Liam began to rouse. Garnet immediately rose from bed and darted towards the french doors of her balcony, throwing them open and allowing the sharp, cold breeze of autumn to sweep the quarters. Liam became alarmed in the next moment, as if he had been caught red handed, and he bolted from bed, following Garnet's hurried steps to the railing. Garnet's onyx hair tumbled over her shoulders as she looked over her worst nightmare. The smell of smoke, the sound of clattering steel echoed, through Garnet's skull, rattling her to her very core. Every terrible memory from the past two years surfaced and Garnet felt a physical pain roll over her. She hugged herself in her satin nightgown in the cold autumn wind as tears bubbled in her eyes. She saw flashes of the destruction of Bahumaut. She saw her own mother's frazzled movement, ordering harpoons to be fired at her. She felt all the pain she had tried so hard to swallow overcome her. The garden was burning down. The howls of pain, from both sides, reached deep inside her, grabbing hold of the hardened ball of hurt and sorrow within her and catapulting it upward. Garnet's head was on fire, suddenly, and in her anguish, she crumpled against the balustrade of her balcony.

“Garnet!” Liam raced into the scene, grabbing hold of her elbow.

A heat flared inside of the Queen and she staggered to her feet, jerking her arm away from him. The engineer was obviously shocked, and stood still as Garnet pressed herself to the railing across the balcony. The cool wind wrapped her dark hair against her arm and she looked to Liam with a face that was so pinched and confused.

Liam stepped forward, bringing his hand out. “Garnet, we have to get you to safety! Your kingdom is under attack. We must go before someone catches up to us.”

Below, there was a wave of shattering glass, followed by cries of agonies and hoots of enthusiasm. Garnet’s insides nearly fell out of her. With a thundering heart, she approached the scene from her balcony. The autumn breeze brought the lace of her nightgowns collar against her skin and she felt utterly sick to her stomach. By the moment, her head was becoming heavy on her neck. What was wrong with her, she wondered. War was nothing new. Betrayal was a yawn. But the anguish, the heaviness, the incomplete feeling, that drenched her combined in a way unimaginable. Garnet didn’t



know what she was feeling. She didn't know how to fix it or even stop it. She felt as if she was spiraling, unable to grip a single life line. And when she lifted her eyes to look at the concerned Liam, her sight grew blurry and she gasped and looked away, pressing her sticky palm to her forehead.

“What’s happening?!” Liam reached for her again and Garnet staggered away, gripping the swinging french doors.

“Stop! I must get dressed and help my kingdom!” Garnet stumbled into her room, heading straight for the wardrobe.

“Garnet, we have to protect the throne!” Liam came into the room. ‘You’re but one person against a hundred men who want you dead! Sweetheart, listen to me!’ Liam came to the wardrobe door and swung it back to find Garnet wrangling a white button up and her orange corduroy skirt from the hangers. “Sweetheart—”

Garnet looked to him with her chocolate eyes that were as hard as stone. They were eyes Liam didn't recognize. “Why are you calling me that!? This is an emergency! My people need me!”

Liam licked his lips, almost pensively. “But we have to keep you safe! You’re the *Queen*.”

Garnet pulled into her skirt, twirling behind the other wardrobe door to change into her blouse. “I have to find Beatrix! Or Steiner! Where is Zeke!?” Garnet staggered into the room, reaching for her velvet maroon boots that were crumpled against the side of her vanity. “I fought as a princess and I did not give that up after I became Queen!”

“Garnet, sweetheart, think rationally!” Liam knelt before her as she jammed her feet into her boots, violently ripping the zippers up.

Garnet paused for a moment, gripping the edge of her seat. Her head was throbbing horrifically and suddenly all her fears, her loneliness, her regrets, were bubbling to the surface. It was so much of a wave, it impacted Garnet in that moment physically and emotionally. It was as if weeks or even months worth of feelings were flooding her. She had once felt them so acutely, so vibrantly, in her daily life. As they rushed against her once again, Garnet wondered how she could ever forget. Her eyes darted to Liam and she briefly wondered why he was in her chambers, under dressed. But as she looked over his soft, concerned face, she could only

stare as her lips pursed. The Queen felt like she was bursting from the surface of water, encased in a layer of ice. Everything in the front of her mind was fuzzy, confounded with an awful ache.

“What did you do!?” Garnet asked, her eyes becoming glossy. Liam’s shoulders drew back as he watched her face soften, her feelings deflate.

“Garnet, what do you mean?”

Garnet came to her feet and marched back toward the open balcony doors. Ash and smoke had found its way into the atmosphere of Alexandria, raining down on them from the heights, and it stung Garnet in every way. She turned to Liam as another explosion rang out down below. “Something is wrong, Liam.”

“Yes, love, something is very wrong. Tell me—”

Garnet backed away from him, holding her hand up. “No!” She cried out, her voice nearly faltering. Her soul was crumbling with each curling leaf of fire in the garden below. ‘Something is wrong with *me*.’ They were both still in that moment, despite the commotion, screams, and hurried orders that resounded out and followed the billowing smoke into the inky darkness. Ash was beginning to fall

into their hair. Garnet's eyes were wet, her chest rising and falling as she looked to Liam. "What am I feeling?!"

"The kingdom is *under attack*," Liam gestured over the balcony railing, ash softly collecting into his palm. "You're probably feeling a lot, but darling, we must keep you—"

"Why are you calling me pet names?!" Garnet inched herself through the french doors, backing away towards her nightstand. "You did something to me. I've never felt this out of sorts before."

"Garnet..." Liam trailed after her. "I think you're upset. Let's take a deep breath—"

"Liam, I am serious," Garnet bumped into her nightstand, desperately gripping the elaborate end carvings. "What did you do to me? This... this doesn't feel normal..." Her forehead felt like a swimming pool for blood that sloshed about. She could almost see stars. Garnet's wet palms stuttered to keep a grip on her night table. "I feel ill, Liam. What did you do to me? Please tell me. There has to be a cure.." Liam turned towards the balcony, running his hands through his dark curls. The charming, similar girl at the bar hadn't uttered a peep about ingredients. How would he know? He

shook his head, watching as flakes of ash fluttered to the ground.

Behind him and across the room, Garnet's skin had grown sticky. She blinked rapidly as she focused on Liam, her hand fumbling to find the handle of the top drawer. Hurriedly, her warm hand grabbed the felted hilt of a dagger and she lifted it in front of her as she leaned on the table for support. Liam took moment after moment to consult himself, pacing towards the balcony that only showed chaos extending beyond it. Garnet closed her eyes in an attempt to catch her breath. Her arm wavered and shook, but she kept the dagger steady in front of her. Her chocolate eyes ran along the blades length. Garnet's heart was hammering in her chest, the sweat plaguing her body making her dress shirt stick to her. Inside, she felt like she was treading underwater just short of the surface. It was so close. And the warm familiarity of something she thought she'd lost was looming closely to her. Except, she didn't know what it was. But she craved it and Garnet sighed hotly, tilting her head down. Still, she continued to hold the weapon firm and, finally, Liam turned around, becoming motionless when he saw the scene in front of him.

“Garnet...” Liam held his hands up, his leather dress shoes shuffling in a muted manner across the carpet. “Lower the knife... We don’t have time for this misunderstanding.”

She took a step forward with great purpose, her sweaty palm tightening around the hilt. “Tell me what you did. I’m being serious, Liam. I *trusted* you.” From behind, ash began to flurry into his collar, pressing to his hot skin despite the low temperatures of the autumn night. He kept his arms extended and took a step towards her. Garnet ground her teeth together. Liam had never seen her so tense, so blindingly angry before. “Not a foot closer.” Garnet’s told him.

“Garnet, I swear I didn’t do anything out of malice,” Liam’s tongue felt so dry and rugged like a carpet coming unglued. He kept his hands up for her to see but he didn’t dare inch any closer to her. His face felt incredibly flushed and a rush of blood was coursing through his skull. “I only wanted to see you happy. I wanted you to get rid of all those insecurities and be free to just live your own life again! All I did was try and give you an extra nudge, that’s all.”

“By poisoning me!?” Garnet’s elbow crumpled a bit and the knife tilted upward, making Liam swallow a growing lump in his throat.

“It wasn’t poison!” Liam shook his head, rustling his brown hair. More ash scattered around him.

“You’re *lying!*” Garnet’s voice rose, though it was quite shaky.

“He’s not, actually.”

The Queen and engineer’s eyes snapped towards the door they were both surprised and flustered they had not heard. Garnet lower her dagger, feeling her face and body only grow hotter. Standing in the doorway, she swore she was looking at her reflection. One of herself wearing a black tunic and long, form fitting riding pants. She was wearing tall brown leather boots and her thick onyx hair fell over her shoulder in a fishtailed pleat. She was smiling with rosy cheeks and bold brows. Dangling from her gloved hand was a long sword. It was nothing elaborate, but it gleamed and was well taken care of. “You know it’s basically treason to lie to a monarch?” The girl grinned widely and came into the room, shrugging nonchalantly.

“Who... who are you?” Garnet asked, digging her heel against the carpet. Liam could only stand there in a silent shock. Now side by side, the two were distinctly identical. It wasn’t his mind deceiving him or his eyes playing tricks on him. Astrid looked like Garnet. Or did Garnet look like Astrid? The girl was slow to pace around the room, her black cape languidly following her trail. She looked to the tall vaulted ceiling with its dark maroon paints and elaborate gold leafing. She admired the matching mahogany furniture that gleamed in the candlelight. She ran her hand along the foot of the bed, her eyes following the creases in the satin bedsheets. Finally, her eyes met the ones that matched hers.

“Oh goodness, I suppose I forgot to introduce myself to you,” Astrid said, grabbing hold of the bedpost and energetically swinging herself about. ‘Of course you’d have no idea who I am. Even though.... I know everything about you, Garnet til Alexandros XVII.’ She paused, jabbing the tip of her sword into the brocaded carpet. “Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Astrid Margaret Cardinal Alexandros.”

Garnet’s mind whirled as she soaked in all the words she had said. “Did you say... Alexandros?”



Garnet's brow furrowed together. "How is that even possible?"

"Your family probably thought it was a gridlocked name, never able to leave the premises of this forsaken castle," Astrid freed her sword and continued around the room. Curiously, she peered into a jewelry box and smiled when she heard a gentle lullaby careen out. A beautiful porcelain figure, drenched in whites like a graceful debutante, twirled about. Underneath, Astrid's eyes soaked in many precious gems. 'I guess you were right about that,' Astrid looked over her shoulder at Garnet. The Queen now held her dagger firmly at her side, her face stone-like and unmoving. Beside her, Liam was pale, as if his stomach had dropped out of him. "Blood, however, has a funny way about how it trickles out..." Astrid closed the jewelry box, turning to watch the raining ash. The room itself was growing faintly smoky as the garden descended deeper into chaos and further into destruction.

"And just what exactly are you saying, Miss Alexandros?" Garnet asked, pursing her lips tightly.

"Please," Astrid smiled, quite happy with herself as she turned away from the ongoing battle beyond

the balcony. “Call me Astrid. I’m not much of one for formalities, Your Majesty.”

“Then tell me what you mean... Astrid,” Garnet said, drawing her shoulders back. Inside, however, she felt quite ill. Like all of her muscles and organs were curling in on themselves, squeezing her skeleton tightly, threatening to make her head explode. Her belly and forehead were on fire. The back of her neck was puckered in goosebumps, however, and she couldn’t stop an unnerving shiver from crawling up her spine. She stared at the cheeky Astrid, feeling her skin grow damper. “Cardinal Alexandros...” Garnet whispered to herself, sorely touching her temple. That had been her paternal grandmother’s name. It was who Princess Garnet had been named for to reflect the fiery and vibrant red nature that was King Emet’s mother. She had passed away far before the princess had ever been born. Garnet’s head was throbbing. “That’s not possible. In fact, it’s quite *impossible*.”

“What would you know?” Astrid shook her head, giving her sword a deft swing. ‘You’re not even the real Princess Garnet. You never were an Alexandros. You’re just some poor little orphan who got lucky and didn’t swallow too much salt water.’ Garnet and Astrid’s faces fell into the same swift, stony

expression. “Lucky you, born under the same stars as Princess Garnet.”

“What the hell is she talking about?” Liam seemed rather flabbergasted, looking at Garnet.

“Stay out of this, Liam,” Garnet lifted her dagger and Astrid grinned, matching her sentiment with her own sword.

“I have the proof,” Astrid told her, pulling her cape back to reveal a leather satchel poised against her hip. “My mother left me everything I needed to be who I rightfully deserved to be. And I won’t stand idly by and allow some orphan destroy the namesake of my father.”

“Your father,” Garnet echoed, pressing her feet firmly into the soft carpet. “He was less of your father than he was mine. I may be an orphan, but you’re a *bastard child*.”

“Sticks and stones,” Astrid laughed, driving her elbow out as she exacted her blade in Garnet’s direction. “I am more than willing to fight for what’s mine. Are you?”

Garnet wished her summoning rod hadn’t been stored in the emergency bunker. The young woman had no intention of locking herself behind several

steel doors, twiddling her thumbs, and waiting for the all clear. But that familiar warmth was growing inside of her and she felt confident with the dagger in her hand. “I’ve been fighting for this kingdom for as long as I can remember. I may not be the real Princess Garnet, but you are even further from being a true princess.”

Astrid grinned. “I’ll have to ask Delta what she put in that pathetic little love potion. It’s made you quite feisty.” In the next moment, Astrid jabbed forward and Garnet staggered out of the way, hitting her shoulder into the poster bed frame. Liam let out a howl, backing away from the scene.

“Let’s just calm down!” The engineer yelled, his lungs burning as the smell of charred plants and decaying flowers penetrated the room. “Someone can seriously be harmed with that steel.”

“You just don’t get it, do you?” Astrid asked, swinging again. Garnet’s arm came up and her small, short sword grazed off the end of Astrid’s. The Queen’s arm nearly failed her and she backed away again, her eyes darting about for a second weapon. “You’re too lovesick to see the world through anything but rose colored shades.”

“You said you were in the business of dream making.”

“Oh, poor, little, egotistical Liam,” Astrid stuck her lower lip out in a mockingly pouty way. “I’m in the business of realizing *my* dreams.”

Liam pressed his shoulders against the swinging french doors. His heart was hammering in his ears as the crackling of fire slowly made its way to him. A blood curling shriek down below rang out that brought the chill of death over the young man. Astrid watched him with a smirk as his entire self-worth began to deflate within him. The engineer had never made such a poor and damning mistake in his entire life. He built machines to fly a regent, for gods sake. How could he allow himself to play into the hands of someone attempting to systematically dismantle the sister throne of Lindblum? He had allowed himself to go mad over the idea of being the Queen’s suitor, but he felt in that moment that he had signed her death certificate.

“You absolute witch,” Liam sneered. “You will be hanged for this, I guarantee that on the throne of Lindblum. You will not get away with this.”

“Oh, sweet Liam,” Astrid shook her head. “I already have.”

Across the room, in a hurry, Garnet tipped a chair over that surrounded her tea table. With a grunt and all her power, she drove her boot through the leg, bringing a jagged piece of wood into her hand. Dual wielding with her dagger, she darted towards Astrid, using the leg of the chair to whack her own dark shadow over the head. Astrid staggered into the wardrobe, her eyes spinning. She was quick to recover, however, drawing her sword into an upward slash. Garnet's knees came together as she caught the sword between her weapons, the tip just inches off from the point of her nose. The two girls struggled against each other.

"I must say, I'm quite impressed," Astrid told her. "If you hadn't ruined my and my mother's life by washing along that shore, I think we could have been friends, Garnet. Maybe even sisters."

Garnet forced her arm to the side, making Astrid follow the weight. The girl twirled out onto the balcony and Garnet stood in the doorway, watching the peasant stand triumphantly with all her chaos behind her. The Queen tightened her sweaty grip on her meager dagger and make shift jab. Her shoulders rose and fell now, her nostrils flared, taking in the scent of her faltering kingdom that made her nearly see red. "I never wanted a sister." Was all the

monarch said before they both made a run at each, screaming in hostility.

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Zidane was out of breath by the second staircase and his insides anguished as he forced himself to stealthily, and hurriedly, climb the heights of where he'd find Garnet. His mind was in fast forward, yet his body was in slow motion. He let out a wheezy cough as he gripped the balustrade. His helmet uncomfortably squished against his wet head. The stickiness of blood plagued him and he wanted to shiver in discontent. His fever was spiking and he felt out of body, but Zidane knew he couldn't quit. His shame of remaining in the shadows for so long was overwhelming and, dammit, it was a hill he refused to die on. Zidane could feel the chill of the marble balustrade through his torn gloves as he began up the next flight. As he continued his jog, he thought briefly to Steiner and Beatrix. This wasn't fair to them. Not when they were trying to move on with their lives, even start a new one. The reaper of destruction, that's all he was. Zidane felt lower than low as he ascended to the next platform, taking a quick inhale. He was mentally preparing for the next flight when a frazzled scream rang out. Moments

later, a maid burst from a side hallway, racing past Zidane down the stairs. Only a beat passed before a tall burly man, clad in belts, and covered in soot appeared, swinging a pick ax.

Zidane drew his sword, unfortunately back pedaling to try and guess what the bandit's moves would be. He didn't want anyone to think they had the upper hand on this gross invasion of the Alexandrian castle, but when the man tower four heads taller, it was hard to take risks to protect what one loved. The invader seemed quite please to run across a Knight of Pluto and, surprisingly, he slung his wrist, sending the pick ax towards Zidane as if it was no more than a frisbee. With all the ache in his joints and protest of his body, Zidane rolled, slamming his shoulder against the glass pane. Outside, fire continued to rage. The pick ax collided with the wall, sending dust and rubble everywhere. As the man made a dart to retrieve his weapon, Zidane could only think the put his ankle out. The burly man was not quick to react and staggered over Zidane's leg, going face first into elaborate carvings on the door way. He held his bloody nose to himself as he floundered to find his pick ax. Zidane was breathing heavily, his insides threatening to explode from him, as he swung his sword, fatally meeting



the man's neck. He was still in that next moment and Zidane staggered away, pursing his lips. His breath was the only thing ringing out as his shoulders heavily sagged beneath his armor. He couldn't focus on the body as it dyed the carpet a deeper crimson. He had to move.

Zidane darted up the stairs, a dry cough making its way through his throat. He was so thirsty and utterly exhausted. Zidane couldn't stop at anything, though. Just four more flights, he told himself. He'd find Garnet, he'd secure the throne, he would make this all go away. And then, maybe, he'd have his redemption where his soul could rest easy without the unending guilt. Even if he and Garnet weren't meant to be, he could pay his dues. His dented and rusty armor rattled against him as he bounded up another flight of stairs, ignoring the severe anguish plaguing him. The fever nearly caused him to see double, but still he pressed on. In that moment, he could only think of all his friends. Freya, Amarant, Quina, Eiko, and most of all, Vivi. They had supported him to the end of the world. And now, he only felt that he was failing them utterly. Though he was only two years older, he couldn't help but be embarrassed by his foolishness and narrow eyesight. He had always fixated, picked and prodded. Now, it

was all coming back on him, reminding him of the ways he failed. He wanted Zeke Tisdoll to die tonight. But would the persona take his body with him?

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The familiar rain pattered against the windowsills and threatened to spill into the comfortable, low-lit room as the balcony doors were left open to allow the spring smell of moisture to waft through. It was late, but Freya diligently worked through the mess that accumulated on her desk. There were letters from old friends who were off on travels around the globe. There were letters from concerned citizens who, even in trying times, managed to ask how she was. There were the regular letters from Amarant, which were curt and short with handwriting to match. Eiko often sent doodles which lifted Freya's heart, hoping the good of children could calm the world. Beyond her dewy window panes, there was what felt like the everlasting reconstruction of Burmecia. It was a tedious project with many voices coming from all directions. The voices of reason from times past collided with the voices of new energy. Freya wished to please both sides, but it wasn't a possible task. And neither side was ready to

back down on their beliefs for the future of Burmecia. As Freya shuffled the letters, she let out a yawn. She barely slept anymore and lately it had been taking its toll. Her pink pleather hat dangled from the chair, her matching coat hanging over the end of her bed. Her ashen hair glistened against the candle light of the room as she organized her letters. Freya wished she could write more often. She hated to think she was too busy for other people, but the kingdom of Burmecia fell on her shoulders heavily, as much as the King and nobles liked to say they were helping. Freya herself was a unifying voice for majority of Burmecia and it took her mind off the true wounds and anguishes she had acquired during Gaia's great disputes that were still present on everyone's mind. Her kingdom was important, but the young woman considered other aspects of her life in absent moments of her brain. Sir Fratley was still out and about. Steiner had sent word about Vivi's grave state. Zidane was still missing. It rained heavily on the Dragoon who wished to be at peace. Her outward exterior exuded that but internally, Freya felt lost and confused.

The door to her chamber flew open and white silks filled her vision as she leapt to her feet with rapid reflexes. A maid of the kingdom had appeared

with a deeply worried face, her claws drawn in front of her. “Lady Freya, get to the balcony, there is trouble!”

“Trouble?” Freya echoed. Her silk shirt wavered as she made a dash onto the balcony, uncaring of the rain. It had been instilled in her, part of her bloody nearly, to expect the heavy drops of Burmecia to come over her. She paused at the railing, however, unable to move. The rain no longer affected her. Just beyond the mountain range, all she could focus on were the dark plumes of smoke billowing into the sky. Her fists curled together as her skin puckered from the chilliness outside. How had she not noticed? Freya’s teeth clenched together as she realized the awful truth. Something was happening in Alexandria. Something bad. Garnet was the only thing running through her mind as she darted back into the room, wrangling her coat on. “Alert the soldiers. We need a front immediately. We’re going into Alexandria from the west!”

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Eiko was knelt beside the old telescope as she pressed her elbows to the mossy brick, folding her hands together. It was the highest balcony of Lindblum and brought Eiko great peace to pray on.

Despite leaving Madain Sari, she felt she could make up by being closer to her ancestors. The night was chilly and almost somewhat humid. The telescope hadn't been used in well over a year and the gold that painted it was curling and peeling off day by day. The cicadas chirped around Eiko as she closed her eyes and focused. The few wisps of gleaming dark hair that fell from her bun swept against the side of her round and rosy cheeks. Eiko shifted her knees back and forth as she settled into her usual spot. She cleared her throat as she lowered her chin against her clasped hands.

“O, heavenly ancestors...” She whispered. “Blessed be your names. Your kingdom, your namesake, still remains unforgotten. I thank you daily for giving me my life for yours, for forgiving all debts and helping me learn to forgive my debtors. I still withstand from temptations in your name to never give up on our sacred duties as Summoners. I ask you do not give up on me nor any ancestor of ours who walks this planet...” In the next moment, Eiko's voice abruptly faltered and she cringed as a deep and jarring pain erupted in her forehead, running the length of her horn. Eiko staggered to her feet and her hand was compelled to grasp the peeling telescope, bringing her warm face towards

it. In the inky darkness, it was unmistakable. Thick plumes of smoke covered the sky across the mountain range. Eiko was surprised she hadn't noticed it before. But she stepped back from the telescope, her wide blue eyes watching the smoke continue to fill the starry night sky. "Garnet..." She whispered before taking off in a dart down the stairs, carelessly kicking her flats off and leaving them behind.

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The cicadas chirped warm and bright that dry, still night as Mikoto's feet gently padded against the uneven wooden boards of the porch. Through the carved windows of the domed homes, Mikoto spied many Genomes and Mages relaxing indoors as yet another day wound down. Another day of peaceful harmony and learning could be quite tiring as Mikoto realized. And together, the Mages and Genomes learned in unison true grief. Master Vivi had passed on earlier than evening. He had been comfortable, however, and surrounded by the peaceful community he had helped bring together. Mikoto had never known tears were salty. She didn't quite understand why the ocean dripped from her eyes. Pressed to her chest, she clung to the collection

of well-used books and filled journals. Vivi had always been diligent, nearly dutiful, as he jotted down his thoughts and processes in lengthening Mages lives. Mikoto couldn't quite describe what she felt as she carefully wrapped belts around his work, securing it tightly together. He passed two Genomes who sat on the edge of the porch, their toes dipping into the languid creek. Their hands were laced together. Vivi had taught them about love. He had taught them a lot. The young Genome worried in that moment what the future presented. Without Vivi, would they ever have their curiosity about human life fulfilled? Mikoto felt uneasy.

The stairs creaked underneath her as her boots meet the footpath weaving between tall and wide fan leaves. Mikoto paused and tilted her head back. The sky had so many stars in it. They had all made an appearance to join the small community in their mourning. She then looked down at the books that glistened in her hands. Her eyes carefully followed Vivi's slanted handwriting. The entirety of the last two years of Vivi's life had been devoted to the Mages and Genomes alike. He worked hard to try and undo all the chaos and sorrow Kuja and Garland had inflicted upon them. Vivi preached about tolerance and love. He showed them how to let go of

things, especially when they had no control over the matter. He had made each member of the Black Mage Village feel accepted and welcomed. The Mages were more than puppets created to serve man's wishes, Vivi told them. The Genomes were much more than the shells and placeholders Garland made them out to be. All of that reasoning was safely tucked into the confines of leather belts. She sniffled as she saw another tear drop dribble onto the books. The ocean was leaking out of her again. Mikoto wondered how humans dealt with the trials of such strong emotions. How could they function day to day, weighed down by the immensity of life? Mikoto wished she had asked Vivi.

The young woman couldn't wait a moment longer. She looked towards the dark, dense forest that spread out before her, calling into the night for a speckled, feathered friend.



## Chapter Twenty-Five

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### Chapter Twenty-Five

The citizens of Alexandria slowly emerged from their homes as the night waned on. The chaos across the river didn't seem to be stopping anytime soon. Women clutched their handkerchiefs, young people's mouths fell agape as they watched the flames lick higher and higher into the sky, forming a complete wall around the majestic castle. The alleyways were packed as people scrambled onto barrels and crates to try and catch a view of the racket they heard. The hot embers wafted through the cool nights air and several families began hurriedly packing, in fears their houses would light up and crumble to ash. It was every Alexandrian's worst nightmare that was reawakened with the doom drenching the kingdom just beyond the small river. Nobody knew quite what was happening. Were they under attack by a neighboring kingdom? Had somebody lost their cool and plunged the kingdom into billowing smoke? No one knew what the morning would bring. Nor even the next hour. It was raining ash all across Alexandria now and the city

remained wide awake as the moons sailed through the sky.

High above on the balcony, Astrid and Garnet continued with their slashing, whacking, and rolling. Garnet's skin was sticky and her head threatened to explode on her shoulders. She was breathing heavily now as she brought the chair leg up, trying to fend off Astrid's frenzied attacks. The moment the wood met the steel, it shattered and sent splinters everywhere. The remaining chunk of the gleaming mahogany whirled out of the Queen's hand, falling over the railing. Garnet was pressed against the cool marble balustrade, weakly holding her dagger up. Astrid was in a similar state of exhaustion. She truly didn't expect the monarch to hold out for as long as she had. Liam had slipped out of the scene, but neither one of the dark haired girls cared to notice. Garnet wheezed as more smoke wafted past them, her dagger shaking in her hand. Astrid's leather boots slid across the pavement as she presented herself widely at the now cornered Queen.

"Give it up, Garnet," Astrid told her, her knuckles turning white as they gripped the hilt of her sword. 'You're losing, whether you want to admit it or not. Look down below, your people are dying. Do you want their blood stained on your palms for the rest

of your life simply because you wouldn't play nicely?' Astrid gestured over the balconies edge and together, their matching dark eyes watched the chaos. Garnet could see Weimar and Haagen running from a large blacksmith who was blinded with an internal anger. Shira was crumpled against a hedge, trying to stop the blood oozing from her shoulder. Breireicht was frantic as he tried to dampen the raging flames. Garnet's shoulders rose and fell heavily, wisps of her onyx hair plastering her forehead. Astrid straightened her shoulders. "Relinquish the throne to me. I am the rightful bearer of this crown. My men will cease fighting immediately."

"And why should I trust you?" Garnet asked, piercing her eyes. "What is this so-called proof you have as being an illegitimate baby of King Emet? If this is what your mother has put you up to, why did you wait so long to come forward? How could you remain a secret for so long?"

"Oh, you know politics," Astrid shook her head. "King Emet had his ways of keeping my mother silent. When he died, I began exacting my revenge. Grief really does a change man until a magical child washes along the shores and he ignores the fact he had another one out there."

“I did not ask to wash up on the Alexandrian shore beside my dead mother,” Garnet told her, feeling a chill wash over her body. Her head pulsed tremendously as the past and all the passive moments she’d lived through surfaced into the forefront of her mind. “I didn’t ask for any of this. I’ve put in my time and I have done my best, which is more than what could be said of you. I’ve given my life to this kingdom. Proof or no proof, I refuse to relinquish the throne to you. You don’t have Alexandria’s best ambitions in mind. You’re only a jaded creature, looking to get even with something I didn’t even let happen.”

“Well, aren’t you so noble and eloquent,” Astrid said sourly, bringing her sword up again. “Too bad you don’t know who you’re talking to.”

“Oh, but I do,” Garnet raised her dagger, furrowing her brow. “I’m talking to a jealous fiend, one I’d never find in my reflection.”

“Look in the mirror again, then,” Astrid replied before bringing her sword up.

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Zidane had to stop to nearly cough a lung out at a balustrade. His running time was no where near how

he performed at the beginning. Zidane was drowning in anxiety. Intruders were in the castle and he was starting to assume the worse. All of his nerves were pricked. Garnet was the only thing on his mind. The good memories of her vibrant dark eyes and pink smile were only shadowed by the current situation. What if she wasn't okay? What if she needed him? Zidane lifted his head and wiped the spit from his lips. Splattered blood still painted the side of his face. Zidane wanted to take a hot bath but that was the least of his concerns at the moment. He cleared his pulsating throat and straightened up. Zidane desperately needed a glass of water to put out the fire that consumed his insides. His frayed gloves slid against the marble balustrade as he swung around, forcing himself forward. He stopped, however, when he saw a frazzled Liam at the top.

“Zeke, oh thank the gods!” Liam panted, coming down to meet him. “You have to get to Garnet’s private chambers immediately. A girl named Astrid is there and she has a sword and—”

“Move,” Zidane rushed past him. The engineer couldn’t get his heart to slow down and he glanced up and down the hallways, waiting for another wave of people to chase the life out of him. Zidane paused at the top of the stairs, his shoulders rising and

falling heavily. ‘Hey, come on!’ Liam was slow to react, as if his mind wasn’t absorbing a thing. After a moment of hesitation, he ascended the stairs again. Zidane reached along his belt, jamming a simple, plain dagger into Liam’s hands. “Alexandria needs all the help it can get.”

Together, they began back up the stairs. Liam’s insides were twisting in on him, he was sure he would vomit at any moment. He pictured himself more of a lover than a fighter. All the alarms were sounding in his mind, yet his body moved against his flight instincts. He glanced at the dagger in his hands that glimmered in the flickering candlelight. He had never used a weapon in his entire life. It was a bigger knife than what Liam had even used in a kitchen. Zidane let out a rattling cough as they began towards the final staircase that would bring them to the private quarters. Liam’s feet stopped. Zidane went a few more steps and paused, turning to Liam.

“Zeke, I don’t know if I can do this.”

“This isn’t the time, Liam. If you love Dagger, you’ll keep moving,” Zidane told him, clenching his jaw together. “Nobody wants to do this, but we gotta roll with the punches.”

Liam furrowed his brow. “How did you know her friend’s had that pet name for her?”

Zidane’s body filled with heat. “I’ve spent a lot of time with her, now come on! Every second matters.”

Liam was a bit flummoxed as he allowed himself to be coerced further. Zidane was ahead of him now, his boots nearly streaking through the long running carpets as he dashed down the hallway in the final yards. Zidane’s undershirt was soaked with sweat and it uncomfortably clung to him. The dents in his armor dug into his body. He slowed as he came to Garnet’s private chambers, the last door on the left of the narrow and twisty hallway. It was an easy place to get cornered in. Zidane’s entire body was on fire and his headache pulsed violently against his head. Zidane knew he was in no condition, but he was backed into a corner. It was do or die, he told himself. He could only hope he didn’t walk in on a tragic scene.

He burst through the door, holding his steel out deftly. The chamber itself was relatively quiet. The smell of smoke irritated all his senses and he blinked rapidly, securing the grate on his helmet. He noticed the furniture was askew and turned his attention towards the french doors. There, he saw a scene that

made him wildly mad. Garnet had been backed against the railing, using only a small dagger to fend off the unwarranted Astrid. The two collided steel and broke away, but Garnet was unable to give herself ground. Zidane could only be proud in that moment that Garnet wouldn't back down. But his heart was in shambles. He made his presence known by kicking the balcony doors open loudly with his boots. When Garnet's dark eyes fell on him, relief could be seen coming across her rosy face.

“Zeke!” She called out.

Astrid looked over her shoulder, annoyed by the disruption. It was amazing to Zidane how identical they were when in the same room. Zidane could have sworn they were entirely different in his own experiences, but he now felt even more like a fool. He kept his sword steady in front of him. “Back away from the Queen.”

“Oh, look, the bodyguard is here to save the day,” Astrid grinned.

“Innocent people are dying because of you,” Zidane said stiffly. He hadn't seen Astrid in years and he had to hold himself steady. The smile on her face seemed misplaced, but she always was a snarky one. He had been blind to it in his youth. But the



contrast of Garnet, gripping the balustrade with a face of strife, brought his heart to shambles. “Call it off now, Astrid. No one has to get hurt.”

The dark haired girl’s grin only grew wider as she coyly cocked her head to the side, her sword glistening beside her. “You say my name like someone I once knew.”

“It’s a common name,” Zidane said, side stepping to stand in front of Garnet. Astrid relinquished the ground without her smile wavering. Garnet now stood beside Zidane with her shoulders drawn back, her dagger held pensively at her hip. “Call your men off before anymore lives are lost.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” Astrid told him. “We came with a goal in mind. And we won’t stop until it’s met. All Her Highness has to do is relinquish her throne to me. That’s all we want.”

“Well, you’re asking too much,” Zidane’s throat was on fire, nearly scorching. “Blood or not, Astrid, you’re not fit to rule this country. You don’t care about Alexandria. All you care about is getting even.”

“You talk a lot for someone whose just a lowly bodyguard,” Astrid sneered, bending her elbows and

scratching her boots across the balcony stone. “If you think you’re right, then do what you do best, Mr. Protector: fight for it.” Only a beat passed before Astrid closed the gap between her and Zidane.

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Steiner couldn’t find Beatrix. The garden was filled with a hazy smoke and the sounds of fighting and suffering rang out around every corner. The smell of blood was very poignant. Steiner kept his sword drawn, leaping over crumpled bodies, as he frantically searched for Beatrix. Several of his soldiers were wounded and bleeding, their blood speckled against the cobblestone. But still, everyone fought with their lives, taking the slashes and doing their best to deal more damage than the last. Steiner paused, looking over a rampant flame licking up the hedges, towards the castle. He hoped Zidane had found Garnet. Several maids had flailed past not too long ago, nearly capsizing the gondola in their hurry to safety. Steiner could only fear the worst for everyone. His heart thundered against his armor, his stomach nearly in his throat. He had to lay eyes on Beatrix and make sure she was alright. But he was torn against the safety of Garnet.

From behind, Weimar staggered forward and fell to his knees. His sword skittered across the cobblestone and Steiner turned to see him holding his side, shaking. Crimson stained his lips. Steiner knelt beside him, grabbing him by the shoulders to draw him back. “Dammit, Weimar! Get to safety!” Weimar let out a wheezy cough and merely shook his head. He drew his hand back to reveal a deep gash where a mace had peeled his armor back as if it was no more than a piece of paper. The gash in his ribcage was deep enough to reveal bone. The heat of the flames surrounding Steiner only became hotter and his eyelashes fluttered as the ash rained down on him. Reality was setting in on him and he looked through the fire at the castle. He had served his entire life to that castle. And now, he was watching it fall. “Weimar!” Steiner’s eyes fell as Weimar coughed violently.

“Captain, don’t waste your time trying to save me...” His voice was raspy. The arm supporting him against the cobblestone quaked like a toothpick threatening to break under pressure. “They’re everywhere, Captain...”

“Weimar,” Steiner’s voice was strained as he fished into his pocket, pulling a handkerchief out. Delicately, the captain dabbed his lips and then

pressed the cloth against his wound, looking around to be sure they weren't noticed. 'We have to get you somewhere safe.' The Knights of Pluto barracks, however, was on fire, crumpling in on itself. "I'll take you to my quarters. It's so dark over there, no one has noticed it yet and I'll have the—"

"Captain..." Weimar wheezed, falling against the sturdy structure of Steiner. "I don't think I can make it..."

"Yes, you can!" Steiner was frantic to push him back to his knees, but the soldiers head bobbed heavily. "You still have women to woo, you still have time on this planet!"

Weimar smiled despite the blood beginning to drip more from his lips. "I had a lot of great dates, Captain..."

"Don't talk like that," Steiner told him, reaching his arm beneath his shoulder. "Come on, you have to stand up. I have to get you out of here."

"It's too dangerous," Weimar was so loose and heavy as he pulled himself away from Steiner. 'Save yourself, Captain.' Weimar let out a rattling cough and he splayed across the cobblestone, shaking pitifully. Despite the fire raging around them, the

footpath was nice and cool against Weimar's clammy skin. Steiner's eyes stung, but he didn't know whether it was the smoke or the salty tears threatening to blubber from his eyes. "It's been... an honor, Cap'n...." Weimar told him, tilting his pale head back. Steiner lifted the grate to see his cloudy, dark eyes.

"You will be buried with honors, Weimar," Steiner told him, doing his best to hold himself together. He pressed his hand to the crest of Alexandria embossed in Weimar's crumpled and dinged armor. "Every future soldier of the Knights of Pluto will know your name, who you were, and what you did for this Kingdom. *I* will never forget your service."

Weimar smiled as a steady stream of blood trickled from the corner of his lips. "Go kick some ass... Captain." Weimar closed his eyes in the next moment and the cackling of fire filled Steiner's ears. He took a deep breath and sat back as the sounds of the war washed back over him and he returned to the world as it currently was.

"Dammit..." Steiner whispered. "Damn it all...!"

"Need some help?"

Steiner looked over his shoulder with a thundering heart. Stepping off the gondola, clad in sleek gold armor with a long javelin, was Freya. The grate of her helmet was flipped up as her feet met the cobblestone, her weapon balancing delicately on her broad armored shoulders. Behind her, dozens and dozens of matching soldiers, sporting the crest of Burmecia had appeared. Freya lifted her javelin and her soldiers advanced forward, leaping across the river, and taking the high ground.

“F... Freya...!” Steiner sputtered. “How did you know?”

“You’re sending a smoke signal that’s reaching further than a hundred miles,” Freya told him. She came forward and pressed a firm hand to his shoulder. “I’m sure Lindblum’s seen it, too. Where’s Dagger?”

“I... don’t know,” Steiner shook his head.

“Beatrix?” Again, just a shake of the head. “You guys are in pretty deep. But my soldiers are of the finest class.”

“Freya, I don’t know what to say.”

“Then don’t speak,” Freya said. ‘Lift your sword and save Alexandria.’ In one deft moment, her

javelin whizzed by Steiner's ear. He looked behind him to see Freya had speared a large brute directly in the windpipe. He gurgled and staggered as he fell to the ground. With ease, Freya drew the javelin from his limp body. "Come on, let's go find Dagger."

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The grating noise of steel sliding on steel rang out on the hot balcony that was shrouded in smoke. Zidane jerked his arm up, causing Astrid to stagger. Liam only watched from the sidelines, holding his dagger with a great fear, like a child watching their parents fight. Garnet held steady behind Zidane, keeping herself at the ready. If she had her staff, she could have given her bodyguard more assistance. The Queen glanced over the railing of the balcony. Down below, the chaos had only descended further into madness. Garnet could only fear the worst for her soldiers. She hoped that Steiner and Beatrix were okay. More than half of the garden had crumbled away into ash. The flames continued with no hesitance, however, to consume the next hedge. The very corner of the property, Garnet saw the Knights of Pluto barracks were practically non-existent. It was the longest night of her life, she was convinced. Garnet worried the sun would never rise.

And when it did, it would only bring to light the destruction and wasted lives that splattered the footpaths. Nearly half the garden was gone. How many of her people billowed into the sky with it? The Queen was no stranger to loss and grief. But it came in cycles to a breaking point. And at that moment, she feared everyone she loved was dead. What if something happened to Steiner and Beatrix? They had been her biggest supporters, helping her through the chaos of taking the throne and losing Zidane. What would she do if she was the only one left standing, knowing everyone gave their life for her?

Zidane lifted his sword to deflect Astrid. He ground his teeth together and deftly elbowed her in the face. The girl let out a cry and fell against the railing, her lip now swelling with hot blood. Zidane's body was shaking and he wheezed, but still, he held his sword steady, being sure to stay in front of Garnet. He never thought he'd be clashing swords with Astrid. Astrid took a moment to breathe and smiled as her leather glove came to wipe the crimson blood away. For a brief moment, her dark eyes scanned over the balcony balustrades. "I don't see what you have left to fight for," Astrid said, straightening up and looking to Garnet. The Queen



was pale and sticky with sweat. Her shoulders rose and fell as anxiety washed between the crevices of her being. “All that’s happening down there... how could you expect a single one of your soldiers to survive? You’re outnumbered, Your Majesty. Give it up.”

“She’s not giving up anything,” Zidane’s hot throat rasped. “You are terrorists and terrorists don’t win, Astrid.”

“Oh, says who?” Her face seemed so lighted with delight. “How can that be when I’m seeing several bodies of your men? Just take a look.”

Zidane was hesitant, keeping his sword up as he inched towards the railing. His heart rattled in his chest as he saw the familiar armor of the Knights of Pluto. There were two bodies in sight strewn across the ground, unmoving, as the chaos continued around him. From the height of the balcony, however, Zidane couldn’t make out who it was. Briefly, Steiner and Beatrix crossed his mind. He looked to Astrid, nearly quaking beneath his armor now. His fever spiked highly, along with his own emotions.

“This is it, Astrid,” Zidane sneered. “You’ll die right here, right now, on this balcony. And all your

dreams will die with you.”

“Aw, did I hurt someone’s feelings?” Astrid smiled, her teeth stained red. “You know...” She tilted the tip of her sword against her boot and leisurely strolled the open space of the balcony as smoke continued to puff by and ash rained down on them. “You’re quite bold for just a Queen’s bodyguard. It’s too bad you spend your life in servitude to this throne. You would have been an incredible asset for our cause. You’re still standing and fighting, even when I sent those peasants to infect you. I never caught your name.”

“It’s not important,” Zidane told her, suppressing a cough rising in his chest. “What’s important is—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Astrid waved her hand dismissively, turning to him. She brought her sword out to her side as she shrugged. ‘I’ve heard it all before. Sworn duties, civility, what a bore. But you know, it’s quite interesting you live by those words. It never quite was your style.’ Zidane was quiet as he only stared at her. “Do you think I am an idiot? I’m not nearly as foolish as you two. You should have played your cards better, been less confrontational, if you wanted to succeed.”

“What are you talking about?” Garnet asked, blinking her eyes rapidly against the dry smoke.

“Gods, you’re so dense,” Astrid laughed. “You’re looking at a man who attended his own funeral.”

“I don’t understand,” Garnet shook her head, looking to Zidane.

“Oh, it doesn’t matter,” Astrid grinned and brought her sword back at the ready. Zidane glared intensely at her. He had never lowered his guard once during the exchange. ‘He’ll be dead shortly, anyway. No use in sending you through the stages of grief again.’ She bounded forward, faking a slash. Zidane fell for it and she deftly tilted in her boots, ramming her shoulder into his chest. Zidane staggered back, hitting the railing. Garnet tried to intervene as Astrid came forward, but the snarky girl used the hilt of her sword to hit Garnet in the temple. The queen’s eyes spun as she found herself on her knees, her head pulsating intensely. Zidane ground his teeth together and was about to push away from the railing when Astrid pounced on him, bringing the edge of her sharp sword against his throat. The yells and violence down below rang up towards them, the heat of the fire licking the back of Zidane’s neck. “I could slit your throat like paper.”

Zidane fought against her arms. “Even if you kill me, there’s still a line of people ready to defend Dagger.” Garnet lifted her head, her eyes wide as she watched the exchange. “You won’t kill me, though. I know you won’t.” Astrid let out an angry snort, and lifted her sword, using the butt to hit Zidane in the grate of his helmet. The piece of armor went flying off his head, falling down into the chaos below. His brown hair wavered back and forth, his eyebrow bleeding now, as he continued to tussle with Astrid. From where Garnet was on the ground, she was shaking, her entire body paralyzed. None of this was happening, she told herself. None of this could possibly be real. Zidane felt the warm trickle of blood sear past his eye.

“You should have kept your hair blond,” Astrid told him, still struggling to bring the sword down. Her eyes looked so dark, nearly manic. Zidane was realizing in that moment Astrid had completely lost her marbles. Given the chance, she probably would kill him. His back dug against the rigid carving of the railing as Astrid pressed herself into him. His boots scraped against the cobblestone as he fought her off, but he only found himself teetering further over the railing, dangling above the war. Garnet

staggered to her feet, still dizzy from the clunk she had endured.

“Liam, we have to help,” She said, grasping the french door. Liam looked to her like a frightened little child.

“Their swords are longer than ours.”

Garnet brushed past him, going to a decorative pedestal situated in the corner of her room. Garnet stuck her dagger into her waistband and grabbed hold of the marble bust that depicted the original ruler of Alexandria. She only glanced fleetingly to his stoic features, turning to Liam. “Come on, grab something! That vase over there!” Liam, however, still remained only petrified in place. Garnet pursed her lips together and rushed back onto the balcony, her feet padding softly against the accumulating ash. With a yell, Garnet swung the bust, clunking it against Astrid’s head. Surprisingly, the bust exploded and Zidane squeezed his eyes shut and turned his heads as the crumpling chunks rained down on him. Astrid screeched, falling onto the ground, her sword sliding away. Garnet nearly threw herself off her feet with the force she had used to attack Astrid. Zidane pressed his elbows to the

railing, letting out a raspy exhale. His heart was thundering in his chest.

“Thanks...” Zidane said, raking his brown hair from his sticky face. They looked to each other soundlessly in that moment despite the chaos of the world around them.

“All this time...” Garnet shook her head.

“We have to get out of here,” Liam burst into the scene, rather antsy.

“I cannot abandon my kingdom,” Garnet told him. “You can go if you want, Liam, but I’m not leaving.”

“Aren’t you... so noble...” A faint Astrid muttered from the ground. Her hands curled around the soft mounds of ash and she lifted her head. Several streams of blood oozed out from her hairline, her cheeks rosy. “There is nothing left to fight for in your kingdom. I’ll kill every last one of your people; maids, butlers, whoever stands in my way.”

Zidane drew his sword out, tenderly placing the tip beneath Astrid’s chin. “Will your people know what to fight for if you’re dead? Who else in your cause can assume the throne?” In that moment, her

eyes seemed so familiar. It wasn't too long ago he used to look adoringly into them as he shared hot noodles with her nestled in an alleyway. Her trembling body had once been encased in his arms.

"You won't kill me, Zidane..." She said, keeping her face composed. Liam looked to Zidane in that moment with a furrowed brow.

"Zidane?"

"Shut up, Liam," Astrid sneered. In one deft movement, she slapped Zidane's sword away and snagged hers from the ground. She staggered to her feet but the world still spun around her and she fell against the balustrade. She held her sword up, meeting Zidane's in a draw. "You loved me once. And now, you're only filling that void with *Her Majesty*. I was all you had when we were young."

"No," Zidane shook his head. "*I* was all *you* had. Stop lying to yourself, Astrid. About everything."

They shared a tense and silent stare down before a droning noise began to fill everyone's ears. Garnet's neck snapped to the sky, wondering what could possibly be next. But her heart lifted and she approached the railing in near disbelief. Her eyelashes fluttered as the ash came across her face.

It was Lindblum. Several airships were clustered in the sky as they drew over the burning garden. Without a moment to spare, ropes unfurled from the edges and brightly colored purple and red soldiers began to spiral down. Help had arrived. Maybe it wasn't all a lost cause after all.

“Looks like our friends have arrived,” Zidane grinned. He looked back to Astrid. “Stand down. Or I will be forced to stop you.”

Astrid's eyes lingered over the approaching airships. Slowly, she looked back to Zidane. “Then kill me. You don't have another choice.”

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Beatrix slashed her rubied sword through the thick shoulder of an angered brute. She panted heavily as the sticky blood plagued her arms. How many more? Where were they all coming from? Beatrix pursed her lips. Dozens of bodies littered the floor and it had her stomach constricting as she saw a few of her own girls. Some were so young and still had a whole lifetime ahead of them. Beatrix coughed dryly, looking towards the fire surrounding her. Even if they stopped the enemy, the fire would become their new foe. In her moment of distraction,



a heavy boot kicked Beatrix behind her knee and she let out a cry as she tumbled to the ground. Sorely, she ran her hand along her round belly, grabbing her sword to meet his spear. The deflection caught him off guard and he sneered at her. Beatrix's mobility was stunted, however, and she didn't have time to get to her feet as he brought his spear down heavily. But it stopped short of her. Beatrix was speckled in blood and she cringed away, catching the glint of a golden javelin. The brute stood there for a moment, dazed as the life drained out of him, before he tumbled backwards and crumpled with the other motionless bodies.

“Beatrix!” Steiner appeared, pulling her to her feet and into a warm embrace. That hug meant everything to Beatrix as the world crumbled around her. In the next moment, Freya leapt down from her vantage point, pulling her javelin free.

“Pregnant and on the battle field?” The Burmecian looked displeased as she brushed her ashen hair from her face. “Have you no sense for your own life?!”

“I’ve lost a quarter of my team,” Beatrix said. “I cannot sit this one out.”

“Well, now you will,” Freya told her, drawing her shoulders back. “My team is here, they will—”

The trio froze as they heard the drones of airships and they all assumed fighting positions as they cocked their heads back. What now?! Their minds were only running rampant of what could be happening next. They were so disoriented as to even what time it was. Was the sunrise anywhere near? The moons in the sky continued to shed their milky light down onto the gruesome scene that unfurled in front of the Alexandrian Castle. But when their eyes met the sky, they felt a glimmer of hope reach them.

“Lindblum! They’ve come to our aid!” Steiner grinned, gripping his sword tightly. “Surely this won’t go on much longer.”

The ropes began uncoiling across the garden. Beatrix tucked a lock of hair behind her ear as the wind of the airships lifted her tired hairstyle. It was like a lifeline sent from the heavens as the plentiful soldiers of Lindblum spiraled down around them. Many went off in haste to find trouble, while the ones nearby formed a protective barrier around Steiner, Beatrix, and Freya. The noises of battle grew louder as a new team joined the fight. Despite all the chaos around them, the three old friends

couldn't help but smile at each other. But their smiles vanished in the next moment, their faces filled with surprise. Freya held her hand out in front of her.

“Snow...?” Freya furrowed her brow as cold little droplets fell into her palm and melted.

“No,” Steiner shook his head, looking up. “Shiva.”

## Chapter Twenty-Six

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### Chapter Twenty-Six

The hot chaos in the Alexandrian garden had come to an abrupt halt. Soldiers and brutes alike paused as the sprinkling of snow and frozen water droplets came over them. From the balcony, Garnet watched as she realized exactly what was happening. From above, a bright light was forming in the sky, followed by the formation of a slender blue body. Everyone gawked in fear, fascination, and shock as Shiva's long ponytail followed her fluid movements. She reached towards the sky to draw her power in, an intense beam culminating. From the deck of the airship, with a brave looking Regent Cid, he watched as his adopted daughter drew her shoulders back and moved in unison with the magnificent being occupying the sky. The air grew cold despite the raining ash and rampant fires. But that all ceased within a blink of an eye, with a blinding flash. The hedges surrounding the soldiers sizzled as smoke now wafted away. Singed and charred branches drooped over, at last cooled. Soldiers who a moment before had been horribly hot now found themselves overcome with a chill. And just as quickly, Shiva

was gone and a silence filled the space. The invaders grew nervous, not completely aware of what they had just witnessed. Beatrix raised her sword in that moment.

“ATTACK!” She bellowed. It echoed across the garden and the silence only lasted a beat more before the Burmecian, Lindblum, and Alexandrian armies advanced. The soft flakes of ash stirred up into the air as everyone danced about, the tables now turned. The soldiers’ breaths puffed from their lips as they slashed down the remaining brutes who now scrambled away, sensing all was lost. Beatrix began forward, too, but both Steiner and Freya grabbed her arms.

“Go find Dagger,” Freya told her. “We’ll clear the garden.”

“But—”

“We’ll see you soon,” Steiner said, tenderly brushing her jaw. “Get to safety. Please.”

When they locked eyes Beatrix finally felt the wave of her emotions catching up with her from the entire ordeal. The fear of losing Steiner rushed by her, followed the relief of being reunited with him. Her feelings warped together like an accordion and

whipped through her like a belt. Beatrix pursed her lips and nodded. There was enough help now she could slip out. Steiner grinned at her, as if understanding everything running through her mind in that moment. When his hand firmly touched her belly, Beatrix couldn't help but feel hope, finally, after a night that seemed to have no ending. Beatrix turned and took off in a jog around the charcoal garden hedges, disappearing from sight. Freya and Steiner shared a look now, one full with camaraderie and understanding. From above, a shrill squealing made it to their ears and they cocked their heads back. Swirling down the uncoiled rope was none other than Eiko. Her floofy yellow skirt was filled with air, revealing her lacy knickers underneath. She landed in front of Freya and Steiner, barefoot to their surprise. She was grinning widely, as if she had just made her appearance on a stage. Boldly, Eiko pressed her hands to her hips.

“Late to the party, but we made quite the entrance, didn't we?!”

“You came at the perfect moment,” Freya agreed, standing her javelin against the charred cobblestone. “Quick thinking with the summon.”

“I just did what Dagger would have done,” Eiko replied. “Where is Dagger, by the way? Is she OK?”

“Beatrix just went to find her,” Freya said. “The invaders didn’t get to the castle. She is probably just fine. Her bodyguard made it to her, right?”

Steiner straightened his shoulders. “I sure hope so...” He muttered, reflecting on Zidane’s fragile health state.

“Come on,” Freya began across the plaza. “We need to to mitigate the danger. Eiko, you should start tending to the wounded.”

“Can do!” Eiko was eager to help and her little feet slapped against the stone as she hurriedly began searching. It was a bit unnerving to the young girl to look over the still and crumpled bodies, but she held strong because she didn’t want Dagger to do this. Not in her fragile state. She knelt down, her skirt ballooning around her, as she shoe horned herself between two limp bodies. Tenderly, she reached down and grazed the cheek of a female soldier from Squad Beatrix. Her eye lashes fluttered and her dry lips, covered in blood, moved ever so slightly. Eiko saw she was bleeding from a near-mortal wound to her shoulder.

“I’m dying...” She whispered, opening her glazed eyes. “Are you here to take me, Angel-Child?”

Eiko brought her hand to the wound, a gentle white and green light swirling from her little fingertips. She focused intently, her brow furrowed, before she looked to the girl. Her tanned cheeks hadn’t gained much color back. “What’s your name?” Eiko asked her, trying to distract her from the immense pain. Beneath her hand, she felt the young soldier tensing up, trying to refrain from writhing.

“... Inez,” She said, looking to the cluster of stars above her that were practically spinning. She let out a moan as Eiko’s healing intensified. “... What’s Heaven like?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Eiko told her. “I hope it’s peaceful, though. My grandpa deserves to be at peace.”

“Who are you?” Inez’s face contorted with pain as Eiko continued to try to close the wound. The blood was dark and clumpy, though, and the young girl was beginning to assume the worse.



“My name is Eiko,” She replied. “I’m a friend of the Queen’s.”

“So... I’m not dead?”

“Nope,” Eiko shook her head. “You’re in the Alexandrian garden. The fight is over.”

“It’s so quiet...” Inez said, trying to focus on the world around her. “Did we win?”

Eiko grinned as the blood began to ease up from oozing out of the wound. “We did.”

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On the balcony, however, tensions had not eased. Zidane, Garnet, and Liam stood before the knelt Astrid. Astrid’s face was wet and pale and she looked through the curved railing with her lips drawn together tightly. Her heart hammered sourly in her chest and her shoulders rose and fell with a loss anticipation. She had planned so carefully for such an extended time. How had she failed? Her body waxed and waned between an intense heat and a chill. Astrid turned her eyes towards Zidane, who held his sword towards her. She had crumpled beneath her failure after the summon had filled the sky. Astrid thought she had planned for everything,

but obviously, she had sorely miscalculated. Zidane's dark bangs clawed over his sticky forehead as he glanced down below.

"Looks like it's over, Astrid," Zidane told her. "Your desire to take the throne has—"

"Just kill me already," Astrid said sharply. "There's no point in drawing this out."

Zidane was quiet for a moment, shifting in his boots. It was hard to believe that just two and a half years ago, he sought her out in the sunny streets of Lindblum. That he'd lace fingers with her as they made their way bar to bar, scoring free booze late into the night. He remembered the times the cold autumn rain would come down and they'd howl and spin in it. Zidane had put her out of his mind a while ago and was surprised at the influx of memories washing over him. Now, seeing her at the end of his sword seemed like a serious twist in events.

"I'm not going to kill you, Astrid," He replied, simply.

"Why not?!" She demanded, furrowing her dark brow. "Don't act like you're doing me a favor, Zidane. All that's left for me in my lifetime is to rot in prison. I'll be thrown some meager bread and a

lump of what looks to be butter, completely forgotten. I'll be left there without a thought, like *you* did to me."

Zidane lowered his sword, his head pounding as his fever and aches washed over him again. He glanced to Garnet, who blinked rapidly and looked away. She had still been staring at him as if he wasn't real. He heaved a raspy, rattling sigh. He felt it wasn't the place, but he knew he'd never get the chance ever again. He sheathed his sword and paced toward the railing. His ratty gloves, with all their unraveling threads, grated against the stone. Down below was a hellish landscape. Nearly half the garden had been scorched. The gondola station and Knights of Pluto barracks were non-existent. Zidane spied a young girl with purple hair and a yellow dress navigating through the bodies, searching for anyone who was respondent. He knew it was Eiko and he pressed his lips tightly together. He was angry with Astrid. So many lives uselessly wasted. How many of his own comrades laid amongst the sea of unmoving, dead bodies? How many people of Alexandria had been duped into her cause without a satisfactory end? Zidane lowered his head for a moment. Drifting pieces of ash fell between his

bangs and he looked to Astrid, who seemed so meek on the ground.

“I didn’t tell you anything for your own safety,” Zidane turned to her. From the sidelines, Garnet watched intently. Liam was still nearly shaking at his knees, expecting the chaos to wage on. ‘I didn’t know what was going to happen, Astrid. I was kidnapping a princess. Is that what you wanted to know and hear, finally, after all the seasons? I didn’t know who’d go after anyone involved in the deal. I didn’t even know the entire deal. I just couldn’t tell you... so I could keep you safe.’ Astrid’s face softened as she looked at him. Her dark eyes didn’t want to believe it. All those nights of lying awake, wondering what was wrong with her. Wondering what made him so carelessly brush her aside. The tabloids made sense now, how he was entangled with Garnet. “You have your truth now.” Zidane paced away and let out a wheezy cough, pressing himself against the balustrade.

“Zidane, you should lay down,” Garnet told him. Her sweet voice saying his name again felt otherworldly as he wheeled from everything that had transpired through his fevered state. “Are you injured? You don’t look well.”

Zidane held his fringed glove up. “I have the flu. I don’t recommend getting any closer, Dagger.”

Her hands fidgeted together and she looked to him with her rosy, sweaty face. “I didn’t think I’d ever hear you say my name again.”

Zidane grinned, crossing his arms over his chest. Despite his head threatening to explode on his shoulders and every part of him hurting, he couldn’t stop his joy from exuding from him. “Likewise,” He replied with a simple nod. Just like that, he realized, Zeke Tisdoll was gone. After nearly seven months of ruminating beneath the helmet, all it took was removing it and inhaling a deep breath of air. He felt foolish, but to see Garnet standing in front of him, looking at him earnestly, it made every bad feeling dissipate. Zidane looked to Astrid, who remained on the ground like a timid child. ‘I imagine helps on the way at this point.’ Astrid stared at him intently before darting forward with amazing speed. Zidane anticipated it, though, pressing his heel against the hilt of her discarded sword. She bit down on her tongue as she cocked her head back to look at him. “You gotta face the consequences, Astrid.” She glared daggers at him.

Liam eyes had been focused on the ruined garden down below and pensively he licked his lips. “So all this time you’ve been pretending to be Zeke,” He furrowed his brow, looking to Zidane now. “Why? Why couldn’t you just come back as yourself?” Zidane only shook his head, at a loss of words. Liam wouldn’t understand even a quarter of his reasoning. From across the room, he saw the silver and red glints of a sword leading the way into the disheveled and smoke-ridden chambers. A moment passed before a pensive Beatrix appeared, scanning the area. When she spied Zidane with his boot on a sword and Astrid crumbled to the ground like a deflated balloon, she visibly relaxed.

“Beatrix!” Garnet came forward. “I have not seen you in so long...” Her dark eyes slowly fell. “Now I understand. Look, Zidane—”

“I know,” Beatrix nodded curtly. “I apologize, Your Majesty.”

“You knew?”

“Yes, Zidane’s an idiot.”

Zidane let out a rattling cough, licking his lips. “Well, it all worked out in the end, didn’t it?”

“Just barely,” Beatrix said passively, sheathing her sword. She grabbed Astrid by her wrist, tugging her to the her feet. “Where are your co-conspirators? Delta, Felicia.”

“I don’t know,” Astrid shook her head. “I left them by the gondola station hours ago.”

“Well,” Beatrix said, bringing her closer. “I guess you’ll get the cell all nice and warmed up for them, then.”

---

The garden was silent. There was barely any stirring as the Lindblum, Burmecian, and Alexandrian soldiers tended to the wounded and began taking stock of who was gone. Freya pursed her lips as she carefully stepped over Weimar. Steiner was sitting on the ledge of a charred bush, staring at him. Freya approached the captain, pressing her hand to his shoulder. “Don’t punish yourself...” She said gently. But Steiner still could only stare forward. The Dragoon knew that look. It was one of failure, survivors guilt, absolute betrayal. Freya sighed, leaning her javelin up against the ledge. She seated herself beside him, setting her elbows to her knees. Around them, the soldiers paid

their respect to the comrades they found fallen. Along with Weimar, the Knights of Pluto had lost Dojebon, who had been struck in the neck with a pick ax. Mullenkedheim had been bashed over the head with a bat. Laudo was bleeding out, he was crying and writhing as a soldier desperately tried to apply enough pressure to slow the oozing down. Squad Beatrix was in even worse condition. Only Shira and Inez had survived of the twelve-member team, though neither of them were in good shape. Steiner sighed, rubbing at his sooty, tired face. Above them, the sky was beginning to lighten as dawn was upon them. Freya glanced to Steiner, keeping her back straight. "I won't be the last one to say it, certainly, but it's not your fault, Steiner. Losing men is one of the worst feelings in the world but... you did everything you could. And you surviving doesn't reflect any differently on that."

"I just don't get it..." Steiner shook his head, too ashamed to meet Freya's eyes.

"I'm convinced life and death are not meant to be truly understood," Freya said.

"No, not that," Steiner replied. Freya arched her eyebrows, cocking her head towards him. "It's just... one girl, Freya, put this all together. Just for



vengeance. And I'm a fool... I didn't believe Zidane..."

"Steiner, you've been awake for nearly twenty-four hours," Freya now brought an arm around Steiner's hunched shoulders. "You're not thinking clearly."

Steiner, however, was so confused and muddled in his oversights. "Zidane told me what he knew... that she was a product of an affair. I didn't want to be alarmed. I didn't want to alarm Beatrix... and besides, Beatrix is a strategy wizard, there's no way any of this should have happened. But we ignored Zidane, Freya. We brushed him off even after all his gut instincts have done for us."

"Steiner, you're rambling," Freya told him, flatly. "You're in grief."

Steiner sighed, his eyes gazing out over the rippling water that was growing the slightest bit of pink. "I'm sorry, Freya. I let everything spiral. I should have put a stop to it the moment I knew."

"Knew what?" Freya asked. She was no stranger to the aftermath of a war. The eerie silence was even more unwelcoming than the wailing sounds of battle and gurgles of men choking on their blood. Finding

a loved one and holding their limp body in one's arms was something Freya would never forget. It's why she slept as little as possible. She didn't like to be reminded. Steiner had seen his day, too, she acknowledged to herself. But this had been an absolute disaster for him. Though Alexandria was not unknown for tragedy, the unpredictable death of so many noble, young souls undoubtedly rang in the ears of the middle aged man and gave him something to ponder.

Steiner sighed, drifting somewhat from her outstretched arm. "Freya..." He pursed his lips for a moment, as if to calculate himself. "Zidane's alive."

"You know where he is?" Freya leaned in, quite anxious at the thought.

Steiner opened his mouth, but snapped it shut quickly. He cast a glance around the depressing scene that surrounded them. He let out a huff. "He's here."

"Come again?" Freya furrowed her brow.

"Freya, I'm sorry..." Steiner stood up and started pacing, doing his best to keep his eyes averted from the still bodies of his men. "He's been here for nearly seven months."

“*What?*” Freya came to her feet now, too. “How is that even possible, Steiner!? All this time... does Dagger know?”

“No, of course not,” Steiner shook his head, crossing his arms over his chest. “Just me and Beatrix.”

“But... why?” Freya could only stare at him. “Why was keeping this a secret even a fathomable idea?”

Steiner paused to look towards the mountain range just over the distance of jagged rooftops. The crest of the sun was beginning to make its appearance. Freya’s gold armor was glistening as the warming beams of dawn reached over. “Zidane wanted it that way... and I respected that.” Steiner pursed his lips. ‘I just wanted you to know, Freya. I never wanted it this way. But Zidane’s been troubled, deeply.’ When he looked to the Dragoon, she seemed wrapped up in her thoughts, but still slightly playful to the idea. “Why are you smiling?”

“He kept his promise, after all,” Freya replied, sighing as she grabbed her javelin. She watched as her soldiers tenderly laid the limp bodies of victims in a neat row to be accounted for. ‘Zidane’s been through a lot... maybe I can understand his

reasoning.’ The pink rays of sunlight illuminated her pale skin and ashen hair. “He’s an idiot, though.”

“Yes... yes, he is,” Steiner nodded. He paused as he saw two bodies lay side by side of each other. Quickly, the captain brushed by the Dragoon, inspecting what lay before him. A girl with dark braids, tangled and bloody, with a gash to her neck lay still beside a pale girl with red hair who had been sliced through the abdomen with a sharp object. Steiner stared at them intently, drawing his lips together. Freya joined him in his staring.

“Squad Beatrix?” Freya asked quietly, as if to not disturb anyone’s rest. Steiner could only manage a shake of his head, an intense heat burning in his body. Astrid was willing to sacrifice her own sister’s lives to take what she felt entitled to. It was all so wasted and enraged Steiner to his very core. On command with his swaying emotions, he heard shifting behind him and he turned to see Beatrix pushing a confined Astrid forward. Behind him, Zidane and Garnet walked slowly. The queen was in shock of what she was seeing. She shouldn’t have been there. Distantly, Liam trailed behind them, turning in circles at the destruction and ruins. Beatrix’s face was hard as stone as she saw the scene before her. The neatly laid row of Squad Beatrix,

where the girls chins were tilted down, their hair knotted, their skin flushed, evoked a washing sense of anger and regret through the General. Zidane's face was as white as a ghost from his high fever. His cheekbone was swollen purple and the gash in his eyebrow required stitches. The cat was out of the bag, however, as he appeared in the scene with no helmet to confine his identity. Beatrix heavily shoved Astrid forward, who staggered onto her knees. Behind her, her wrists twisted and tugged at the ropes, but her movement slowed as she laid eyes on the still and bloodied bodies of Delta and Felicia. She was silent and unmoving as the early morning tweets of birds began to resound across the meager twigs and bushes left in the garden.

A Burmecian soldier approached the group, saluting to Freya. "Eight casualties for our army, Lady Freya," He reported. Beatrix and Steiner could only stare at each other in that moment. "Five for Lindblum. Fourteen for the Alexandrian Army. Forty-nine casualties for the unnamed army."

"Twenty-seven too many on our side," Freya crossed her arms over her chest, shaking her head sorely. "Please be sure the Lindblum and Burmecian soldiers are removed respectfully. Send word ahead to the King."

“Yes, Lady Freya.”

The Dragoon was quiet as she thought about the nights events she had been present for. She tilted her head up, though, her slender finger gliding along her chin, as she looked to the sticky and dazed Zidane. “You made it... just barely, it seems.”

Zidane was opening his mouth to respond, when a squeal unknown to human kind rang out. The sounds of little feet slapped against the cobblestone and arms found their way around Zidane’s hips. He drew his arms back, his vision filled with glossy purple. Eiko squeezed him tightly before her little hands curled into fists and she beat against him. “Where have you been!?” She shouted, looking up at him with a constricted face. Her cheeks were red, her hands stained in blood. “I always knew you’d come back, but you just had to wait for us to need you, huh?!”

Zidane grinned lightly, bringing his hand down to rub his frayed gloves along her smooth hair. “Yeah, sorry about that.”

Garnet narrowed her eyes a bit as she tilted her head back. The sun had emerged now and the cool autumn rays found her face. For the first time in weeks, she felt like she had full control of her

thoughts again. Nothing was fuzzy or muddled. The Queen still didn't understand all that was wrong with her. What had happened to her? She felt so drastically different. As she watched Zidane only smile and bear Eiko's fizzling tantrum she could see there was relief in the young lady's face that matched the relief washing through Garnet's veins, and she was sure Freya, Steiner, and Beatrix's alike. She'd have to send word to Tantalus immediately. Zidane had always been there. He never had truly left. Though Garnet pined for answers, in that moment, she could only be grateful.

The scene was interrupted when Steiner turned sharply in his boots, pointing towards the rather dazed Liam. "You! You have overstayed your welcome and lost all trust to be found in this kingdom!" Garnet turned to look at the young engineer. He was sweaty, his dark hair molded in a fun fashion atop his head. He looked to Garnet in that moment and she drew her lips together, her face softening.

"What did you do to me?" Garnet asked quietly, hugging herself as she recalled the frantic and fuzzy moments just hours before. She had never drawn a knife on anyone in her life. But she wasn't in control in that moment, she told herself. Something had

unleashed from her that she couldn't quite put her finger on.

"He gave you a love potion, like the sick little dog he is," Astrid's voice croaked. Her head had been turned down as hot tears scalded her cheeks. She looked over her shoulder with her red eyes, grounding her teeth together. "Liam wanted you. And he would have stopped at nothing to have you."

"You set me up," Liam began forward but Steiner's hefty palm met his chest.

Eiko's arms refused to release Zidane. With his hand still on her shoulders, he furrowed his brow. "What broke it, after all?"

Astrid was quiet as she looked to her sister's, her mind willing them to move. She sighed unevenly, not even glancing to Zidane. "I guess sleeping weed isn't foolproof."

Zidane and Steiner looked to each other. The young man arched his eyebrows. "So... it wasn't me that Dagger needed to see to break the potion... it was her kingdom facing tragedy..."

"Yeah, true love, right?" Astrid scoffed.



“Enough from you!” Beatrix grabbed her elbow, forcing her to her feet. “Steiner, take her to the stocks. The people of Alexandria will contend with her when the time is right.” Astrid struggled against Steiner in that moment with her blisteringly hot red eyes and she looked to Zidane somewhat strained.

“You can’t let them do this to me,” She told him. Zidane could only stare at her with his somewhat glazed and tired gaze. ‘Zidane!’ She jerked her arms back and forth. “You’ve left me once, you can’t leave me like this again.”

Zidane’s fingers curled around Eiko’s wiry shoulders. “I left you for your own safety. You’ve made your bed, Astrid. Now lay in it.”

She pressed her lips together as the hot tears came again. Steiner directed her away. Zidane’s heart was beating in his ears and he let out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding. He looked around at the grim scene surrounding him, reminding him of everything he had sacrificed and destroyed in his reckless wake for the past two years. But when he found Garnet’s face, solemn but strong, they could only stare at each other. With his helmet off, his face revealed, it all still felt surreal to him. The uneasiness inside of him hadn’t lifted. And as he

examined those dark eyes, he wondered if what he had done was right. Or if he could ever right the wrongs he had committed. Garnet broke the eye contact in that moment, turning towards the rows of bodies that surrounded them, tenderly laid out by the Burmecian Army. So much was running through her mind as her eyes scanned over the people she knew and the one's she didn't. She folded her hands in front of her, grimacing at the damage done. She was attacked in her mind by failures, oversights, and deafness. These people had died by her own hand, she told herself. Zidane watched her stiff back. He only understood her ruminations so well. Eiko hugged Zidane tighter and he glanced to the young girl, running his hand through her hair again.

*I might have kept you alive. But I failed you, Dagger.*

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

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### Chapter Twenty-Seven

Night time in Alexandria had come too soon. Garnet was exhausted, her white blouse stained in soot, the frilly hems plagued with blood. Clutched in her hand was a parchment of names. The deceased of Alexandria's army, Lindblum's, and Burmecia's, along with the citizens of Alexandria unwittingly brought in crumpled beneath her slender fingers. She strode through the open doors of the castle, her stiff figure leaving behind the charred reminder of what took place only fourteen hours before. She let out an uneven sigh, drooping her head. So many families to notify, so many arrangements to make. It still didn't feel like it had set in for her, the true immensity of what had happened. Garnet was reeling in so many directions. She paused at the base of the stairs, spying the crescent moon sailing by as night waned on. And what an odd twist of events, she considered. Garnet glanced over the list of names, neatly aligned like thorns in her heart. Of all the people she had to find peaceful resting spots, how could it be after all that time, Zidane wasn't actually one of them? Garnet pressed her lips together before she sighed

and started up the several staircases. Her mind had yet to stop spinning and stewing from the day's events. Tenderly, she folded the parchment in her hand, tucking it into her waistband. She raked her hair back from her face and pushed through two wide-double doors.

The infirmary was busy. Nurses and doctors whizzed back and forth. Garnet watched, almost sheepishly, as patients moaned in pain. Vials of blood clattered against surfaces, bandages unrolling down the aisle of beds. Needles puckered through wound after wound, drawing the skin back together again. Garnet could only squeeze her eyes shut as she spied motionless bodies in bed. They had had a chance, but all hope had been extinguished. Garnet turned away from a deceased soldier, hugging herself at her elbows. In what reality was any of this fair? Garnet was certain justice would never be had. Peace was unattainable, easily laughed at and brushed off. Behind her, a nurse was quick to pull a sheet over the still bodies. Garnet's boots clacked to the shining pale tile as she saw herself past the victims. Each pale face, every single bruise, leapt out at her. She had failed again was all she could tell herself. And every failure only mounted higher and higher on the line. The very thing she swore to never

let her people endure had happened again. But Garnet could only wonder how. How had they missed all the signs? How had Astrid so easily entered and exited the scene of the Alexandrian Castle? It had all been timed so perfectly, to an exact second. With Beatrix's condition and the girl's smooth negotiation skills, she had had a good plan. The only thing she couldn't have predicted was the camaraderie of Garnet's friends that ran thicker than blood. Astrid wasn't talking quite yet. Steiner reported she seemed almost catatonic in her cell. Garnet was sure she was reeling from the loss of her family and revenge. Would she ever talk?

Garnet stopped when she saw Eiko sitting on a bed, squeezing a wash cloth out into a bucket. Her bare feet were dirty on the bottom, her dress crinkled and stained. She paid it no mind, though, as she transferred the wash cloth to Zidane's forehead. He had received stitches in his eyebrow. The color of his skin was a ghastly white, like a linen. The green and purple bruises sprouting across his forehead and cheekbone stuck out sorely. He licked his cracked lips and said something quietly to Eiko. The young girl shook her head and stuck her nose up defiantly. Eiko did a double take once she noticed the bright orange of Garnet's skirt and she waved her over with

great vigor. Garnet was slow to approach, her heart thudding rapidly in her chest. The Queen still didn't believe it was really him. No matter how much she forced herself to cling to the hope of seeing him again one day, it was hard to fathom he was right in front of her. Even after so long, though, he never gave up his own tendencies. He put others first, even if it meant sacrificing a piece of himself in the process. The flu was rearing an ugly head on him as he rattled with a dry cough. Garnet blamed herself for Zidane's state. He didn't deserve an ounce of this, she told herself. She recalled all the moments she spent with Zeke. How could she not have known? Again, she was just a fool sitting on her plush throne. Garnet's fingers fidgeted together in front of her as Zidane's blue eyes turned on her. She thought her heart would leap from her chest. So many restless nights of counting yet another day off the calendar without him. All the prodding her bruised heart went through. As she looked into those familiar blue eyes, she didn't know whether to howl with laughter or break down sobbing. Those eyes searched her knowingly. He read her like the open book she liked to pretend she wasn't. Even after so long, his eyes evoked the same emotions as the last day she had seen him. Eiko looked between the two before she scrambled off the bed.

“I’m gonna go check on Beatrix. She’s with the doctor right now,” She said, skittering off without waiting for a response. The young lady threw a glance over her shoulder as she darted between the paths of two frazzled nurses.

Slowly, Garnet lowered herself onto the edge of his bed, her lips locked tightly together. She fiddled with the hem of her skirt now, almost too ashamed to look at him. Zidane situated himself against his pillow, looking over Garnet. He knew everything she had been through for the better half of the year. Garnet didn’t know what to say. He saw her cry and work frustratingly hard as a means to distract herself. He also watched her get duped by Liam and fall directly into Astrid’s line of fire. He had kept his promise, though. In his own characteristic way.

“Why?” Garnet blurted out, looking to him now. Zidane arched his eyebrows but grimaced as his sutures throbbed. Garnet’s cheeks burned and she cast a weary glance around the chaotic infirmary. “A Knight of Pluto? A hidden identity? Why?”

Zidane sighed, tucking an arm behind his throbbing head. “Guess I wasn’t thinking straight all those months ago... and then it kind of just... spiraled. I’m sorry, Dagger.”

“I’m just relieved you’re okay,” Garnet told him. She had dreamed of a moment such as this dozen of times before. A miraculous meeting to see him once more. But in the reality of it, she was somewhat dumbstruck. Though she had pined for him, a small bit of her had began to accept there was no changing the past, no matter how desperate one was. “After everything, not just this. You survived.”

“Yeah, like Freya said,” Zidane cleared his throat as he sat up straighter. “Just barely.”

“If you joined the Knights of Pluto seven months ago that means there’s five months unaccounted for,” Garnet said, pressing her hand to the crumpled bed sheets. “Where were you?”

“Dali.”

“*Dali?*” Garnet echoed, her eyes wide as she recounted the numerous endeavors Beatrix had been sent out on that spanned to every corner of the world. “But... how?”

Zidane shrugged. Surprisingly, a crooked grin hung on his lips. “My only guess is Kuja tried to redeem himself at the end. The Iifa Tree collapsed and I think he got me out of there... as close to home as he could, I guess.”



“So, Kuja is...?”

“I think so,” Zidane nodded. “I don’t really remember any of it. I woke up in Dali, in an old man’s house, who took care of me until I was well again. That’s really as far back as my memory goes right now.”

Garnet pointed her knees towards him, an onyx lock of hair falling against the frame of her face. “You still remember everything we went through, right?”

“Yeah, of course,” Zidane told her. “My last memory of our adventures was you asking the impossible of me.”

“Well,” Garnet lowered her eyes and slowly reached for his hand. She gripped it tenderly. After a beat, Zidane’s fingers closed around hers. “I guess it wasn’t that impossible.”

They were both quiet for a little bit, the noise of the infirmary not even reaching their ears. Zidane’s thumb grazed her soft skin and his heart accelerated in his chest. After a moment, he licked his lips, pressing himself into his pillows. “What happens now?”

Garnet lifted her eyes to look at him. For a brief second, she thought she was going to cry. It was all crashing in on her in that moment. She sighed, drooping her shoulders. “A lot of difficult things. Things that will take lots of processing. Maybe some healing in between... but I know it will not be linear.” Garnet drew her hand away from his, pulling the crumpled parchment from her waistband. She pressed her lips together and held it out to him. Zidane was silent as he looked over all the names. “Seven months on the force... I imagine you grew close to many of these people.”

Zidane looked away, shaking his head. “Yeah... they became friends along the way.” He looked at the list again. *Delta Tibbets. Felicia Tibbets.* He pursed his lips. “It’s too bad Astrid didn’t land on this list but... I couldn’t kill her, Dagger. Not in cold blood. That would be stooping to her level. She had always been built for revenge.”

“You knew her... romantically?” Garnet asked, arching her eyebrows. Zidane looked to her silently, his shoulders rising and falling as the memories raced by him. “Zidane, this link is important. It might help us find some reason of justice. A way to make sure something like this never repeats itself.

Whatever happened in the past, I don't care. What's important now is what lies ahead of us."

Zidane folded the parchment up, running his finger along the crease with taut fingers. So many fates sealed. He only blamed himself. He licked his dry lips and nodded slowly. "The Trixies was the female answer to Tantalus. Orphan-girls flocked to Molly, just as orphans like myself went to Baku. There was always bad blood between us and them, though. But Astrid was different, I guess. We clicked, despite Baku and Molly warning against it. I don't know why I didn't listen to Boss. He was usually right about those kinds of things." Zidane lowered his eyes and shook his head. "I was young and dumb, though. All I cared about at that time was swiping coins and drinking myself stupid."

Garnet looked to him softly before she again reached for both of his hands, gripping them warmly. "Who you were years ago does not define who you are today, Zidane. In fact, I wouldn't change a single thing about your past. It's made you into who you are..." Garnet paused for a moment, staring at him intently. The blood was hot as it coursed through her veins and her fingers squeezed his hands tighter, as if he'd zap into smoke like in all her dreams. Garnet licked her lips. "And I love who

you are, Zidane.’ Garnet sighed and closed her eyes. She had rehearsed and daydreamed so many scripts and scenarios. In the dead of night, she had whispered everything she had wanted him to know to the milky moonlight. She didn’t want to live with regrets anymore. She didn’t want to be sitting in the wash tub, cringing as she recalled all the words she let passively remain inside of her mind, jumbled and tangled. Garnet tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “This may not be a good time but... you have no idea how long I’ve waited for a moment like this. I thought I had to pass onto the spirit world before it would ever be possible again.”

Zidane grinned lightly. “I think I may have a small idea of the anticipation.”

Garnet shook her head. “Now probably isn’t a good time. We’re in shock, we’re mourning, you’re ill.”

“Dagger,” Zidane squeezed her hands tighter. “Whatever you have to say, you might as well just say it. I’m done delaying everything in my life. Time is too sparse. We can’t wait around until it’s too late, anymore, Dagger. I’ve learned my lesson.”

Garnet’s eyes throbbed and she could feel the piercing saltiness of tears. She sighed unevenly, her

fingers tangling through his. “I just... I didn’t think I was ever going to see you again. After the first couple of weeks with no word or sight, it began to dawn on me just how fragile our lives really are. That we had been playing with fire and had only been lucky so far. I’m no stranger to loss...” Garnet shook her head and looked to him. Her eyelashes were growing wet, but she held herself together, not allowing her body to shake. “I think losing you, though, was one of the absolute worst things to happen to me. More so than losing my mother... and it hurt just as much as when Bahumaut ravaged this city.”

Zidane brought his hand forward to skim her jaw where the tears now began to fall. His fingers were so warm, leaving a trail of fire as he gently caressed her blossomed cheeks. “Aw, hey, come on,” Zidane shook his head. “I’m sorry, Dagger. I never meant to let it get this out of hand. I lost control of the situation. You shouldn’t be cryin’ over someone like me.”

“Oh, but I did,” Garnet whispered. Her vocal cords were beginning to pulsate against her windpipe. ‘I cried every night. Every tea time I spent alone. Every time I was forced to be by myself... all I could think about was you. Nobody could ever

understand, I felt like I was going mad.’ She brought her hand up to grab his wrist as he relished in the silkiness of her olive skin beneath his knuckles. “It’s like I was speaking a foreign language to everyone. And it was so wretched with Aunt Hilda trying to play the matchmaker in my life...”

Zidane grinned, his laugh a bit raspy as his shoulders bobbed. “And what was so hard to believe about someone actually missing me?”

Garnet held his hand to her as she sorely shook her head. “So many people missed you... but no one quite understood the love I had for you... the love I still have for you. There wasn’t a day that passed, Zidane, that you weren’t in my heart, taking up every corner and crevice like you owned the place. Even with that love potion, it wasn’t enough to free me entirely from thoughts of you.”

Zidane’s own face was warm now. Though there had always been chemistry between them, especially as their trial and tribulations began to subside, they had never had the chance to speak to each other about it. The cards were falling on the table and the young man was flummoxed and somewhat surprised to hear the words coming from Garnet’s lips. He had always suspected maybe she was a little sweet on

him, but not in this way at all. Especially with all the time that had elapsed, she was a Queen, after all.

“What are you thinking about?” Garnet asked, somewhat anxiously.

His mouth was parched as he licked his lips. “Everything you’re saying... I feel the same way, Dagger. I never stopped thinking about you. And I did this whole stupid act just for you. I just wonder... can we actually be together? Can we make this work? I’m no royal and the people of Alexandria would rightfully be weary of me. Would I even stand a chance against someone like Liam or even the Count’s son from Treno?”

Garnet was quiet, her wet eyes searching his face. She furrowed her brow and sat up a little straighter. “I think it’s time society turned a new leaf and looked outward for once, instead of inside.”

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The owls hooted and the toads croaked as night continued in Alexandria. With aching, tired bones, Beatrix and Steiner stepped out into the garden from the castle, doing their best to keep their eyes averted from the devastation that sprawled before them. The doctor had concluded Beatrix was okay. She had

been very fortunate, he also told her. Beatrix's hand rest on her swollen belly as together they began towards their quarters. Somehow, the quaint little villa had remained in the shadows, completely unknown to the infiltrators. What remained of Squad Beatrix and the Knights of Pluto had all wound up in the infirmary. Plans for new barracks would need to be laid out quickly. Their boots crunched through the ash and broken tree branches. Beatrix cast a weary gaze at where she had held one of her soldiers when she took her final breath. The crimson blood was still there as a reminder of everyone's final resting place. Death was such an odd concept. Who knew the very path they all walked each and every day, would be where they lay to move onto an eternal rest. The fact a baby was growing inside of her further obstructed the idea of the life cycle. Together, as if on the same wavelength, the couple came to a slow stop to soak in their surroundings. In front of them was a ledge, smeared with blood stains that looked like fingers desperately clawing at the dark stone. It was where Steiner had found Mullenkedheim. He had probably choked to death on his own blood. He shivered inside of his armor.

Beatrix, in that moment, was overcome with so many emotions. They washed against her and she



tried to hold steady, like a dam in the middle of a storm. Suddenly, she was recounting the last decade of her life. She had been splattered in blood, had it dripping from the end of her sword; but saying goodbye to people she had fought with shoulder to shoulder was something she continually told herself she never wanted to relive — but she always did. It was an endless, cruel cycle. Things had to change, she told herself. The suffering had to cease. Flowers deserved their chance to blossom once more. Why couldn't humankind allow themselves the same decency? Beatrix pressed a hand to her chin, contemplating to herself. Steiner cast a glance her direction, pursing his lips.

“I'm sure your mind is racing just like mine is,” Steiner said, pressing a hand to her shoulder blade. Beatrix looked to him, startled from her thoughts. “But let's try and point our compass forward to true north. That's the only way we can start healing.”

Beatrix was quiet for a moment as she looked over the violently stained stone. “This will keep happening again, Steiner... no matter how far north we travel, the insidious ways of our kind will always find a way to block it and have us back at square one...”

Steiner brought his arm around her shoulders, drawing her in. He pressed his hand to her belly and squeezed his eyes shut as the smell of lilac from her hair wafted past. This wasn't how he wanted it. This wasn't how any of it was supposed to happen. He wanted so much more for their growing little family. Steiner wanted to imagine a lifetime where Beatrix could relax during her pregnancy. Where things weren't so strained and nobody was at their breaking points. Why did that always seem unattainable? Why was the timing never right? He squeezed Beatrix closer to him.

"I promise you, things are going to change," He said into her hair. Beatrix's wet eyelashes fluttered against his worn and dirty armor. "Our baby is going to live in the first generation of peace, Beatrix. I promise..."

"I want to believe that so bad, Steiner..."

He drew her backwards, gripping her shoulders tenderly. "I'm going to make it happen, Beatrix."

She looked so beautiful in the milky moonlight. Her pale skin glowed. Even with wet eyes and a face contorted with regret, she was angelic in Steiner's gaze. He wanted to so badly take all her hurt away. He wanted to remove the burdens that weighed down

on her shoulders. But most of all, Steiner wanted her to look towards the future with hope and excitement. He hated that look in her dark eyes, where she was questioning everything and trying to use her experience as a general to collectively lay the stones of her intentions. He didn't want her to calculate so much. Steiner wished she felt more free in her life to pursue what made her happy — not what gave her anxiety.

“I trust you, Steiner,” She whispered, her lips barely moving. In the next moment, her eyes looked past him and her brow furrowed together. Steiner looked over his shoulder as the hooting of a large, speckled owl came over the hedges. His powerful wings worked hard as Steiner spied his sharp talons curling around worn leather belts. Steiner drew his shoulders back as the owl came to rest on the edge of a dirty hedge. He cocked his head at the captain and chirruped again before taking flight, going right back to where he came from. Steiner was quiet as he approached the stack of books left for him. There were a variety of journals. Some were velvet with worn, crooked edges. Others were leather, stained and bleached by the weather. A folded letter caught his attention and he tugged it free. A second one fluttered to the ground, which Beatrix reached for.

He unfolded the first letter, confronted with a date that was only just yesterday, and a rigid handwriting that belonged to Mikoto:

*Dear Steiner,*

*I know this letter and collection of Vivi's work will not find you in the brightest spirits. I can tell you, however, that Vivi passed calmly, surrounded by the community he built with his own bare hands. We will lay him to rest with great dignity and honor. Mr. 319 has spoken of chiseling a rock with a beautiful epitaph for him. If you have any wise quotes, please write back so we can have a better idea of how to honor him properly as he moves on to his eternal slumber. I am sorry you could not be here, but I know Vivi was aware of your lingering spirit. We are having a great difficulty accepting what has happened. No amount of tutoring or experience can help make death an easy question we have all come to learn. I hope all is well at the Alexandrian Castle, that you are in good health, and that Zidane is taking care of himself. We here at the Black Mage Village all send our regards. Tomorrow is a new day, Vivi would always say; a new day to make right of our lives, which we will continue to do in the spirit and remembrance of Master Vivi.*

*Regards,*

*Mikoto*

Steiner was nearly trembling as he reached the end of the letter. His nostrils flared and his insides twisted into knots. As battle cries, flames, and thundering boots erupted in the Alexandrian garden the night before, Vivi had been tucked away in bed taking his last breath. Steiner re-read the letter just to be sure he was seeing straight. It was slowly dawning on him, waxing over his body in an intense heat, that he would never see Vivi again. Or hear his voice. Or be soothed by his presence. He was gone, just like the soldiers he had dutifully trained and entrusted with his sworn duty. His heart was sinking deep into an abyss, so low, he wasn't sure how he'd come back from it. It was like a rug had been yanked out from beneath him and there was absolutely nothing below it, sending him hurdling down. Slowly, Steiner reached for the journals, running his hand along the textured cover. A generation of peace, he contemplated. Maybe Vivi's work was the answer, or better yet, the true key. It was all so overwhelming and numbing for the captain, however. Tenderly, Beatrix gripped his arm, turning his attention towards the second letter. He only stared at it, but Beatrix gave it a curt shake for him

to accept it. Steiner pressed the letter against the journal, recognizing Vivi's eloquent handwriting for such a young creature.

Steiner,

*If you're reading this, I'm already gone. I had an urgency to write this after Mikoto told me you intended to continue with my work. I'm so sorry I couldn't finish it, Steiner. Not only to place the burden on you, but also I've felt like I've failed my people and let down a community that looked to me in a way I had never been looked at before. I trust, however, that you will do justice to what's been started and I know the Black Mages and Genomes alike respect you and can call on you for guidance. After all, your look alone started the domino effect. Despite me being so timid, so quiet, so awkward and weird, you accepted me without question. I could never express to you how much that meant. I had always been so easily overlooked, but you did not allow for it. You made me believe in myself, even when I didn't want to. I am eternally grateful to you, Steiner, and hope in someday I can prove that to you beyond in the spirit world. Please give all my love to our friends who also made this possible. And I hope Zidane comes to realize the fragility of life and how much he means to us, even when he doubts himself.*

*Look after yourself and Beatrix, too. Thank you, Steiner.*

*Eternally Yours,*

*Vivi*

Steiner couldn't stop the hot tears now as he folded the letter up. He tried to turn away from Beatrix, but her hands were quick to find his prickly jaw and direct him towards her. Soothingly, her fingers smoldered over his skin as the man couldn't help but sniffle and huff. Everything was setting in now. As Steiner was overcome by his grief and exhaustion, his inner compass desperately turned to the true north he dreamed of. He wanted dinner parties with friends filled with jubilation and clanking steins. He wanted to see Garnet smile as she stepped in front of her prospering citizens. He wanted everyone to have their happy ending. But in that moment, he couldn't help but sink, despite the words he had just spoken to Beatrix with great earnest.

"You're always the rock," Beatrix whispered gently, as if she could read his mind. "It's my turn to comfort you, Steiner. Together we'll find true north, I promise. I want it just as much as you do." He felt lame as the tears continued to streak his cheeks, his

throat pinched. Beatrix leaned forward, pressing warm kisses to his jaw. She brought his head to her shoulder, her slender fingers glancing down the nape of his neck. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to close down all the terribleness that had occurred.

They could only hold each other in that moment, surrounded by everything that haunted them.



## Chapter Twenty-Eight

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### Chapter Twenty-Eight

Zidane stirred in bed. He felt so stiff, like he hadn't moved in days. The rampant fatigue and throbbing headache were gone, though. He shifted against his pillow and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment before he blinked rapidly, his fuzzy vision slowly becoming clear. He was greeted with the sights of reds, blues, and brown. Zidane furrowed his brow and craned his neck upward as he recognized the figures of Blank, Marcus, and Cinna gathered around his bed. Zidane raked his brown hair backwards, feeling that his stitches had been removed from his eyebrow. Groggily, he glanced around the infirmary. All was calm and more than half of the beds were now vacant. He furrowed his brow, dazed and confused. Blank had been shuffling a deck of cards but perked up when he saw Zidane's movement.

"Sleeping beauty finally awakens!" Blank announced. Cinna and Marcus had been chatting against a wall but came to the foot of the bed with snarled grins when they saw Zidane coherent.

Zidane let out a haughty sigh, falling back against his pillow. Blank pressed his elbows into the bed, smiling at the laid-up soldier. “You’re crazy, you know that right?”

Zidane ran his hands along his face, sighing again. “What day is it...?”

“If you’re askin’ how many days you were asleep for, the answer is four,” Cinna said, curling his fingers around the cool wood of the bed frame. “Your fever got pretty high. Glad to see you awake and aware.”

“*Four days?*” Zidane began to sit up, but Blank pressed him back into the comfort of his bed.

“Chill out,” Blank laughed. “You survived the war, but the flu almost did you in. Take it easy.”

“You were pretty sick,” Marcus told him, sitting on a nearby stool and crossing his arms over his chest. “You didn’t even move when the nurse removed your sutures. It was pretty funny.”

“I’m glad I provided some entertainment,” Zidane said, looking to the ceiling.

“Hey, man, we’re all just glad you’re okay,” Blank said, patting the knotted sheets. “You always

somehow manage to squeak by.”

“Yeah, somehow...” Zidane muttered. “What’s happened? Where’s Dagger?”

“Whoa, don’t work that brain too hard too soon,” Blank told him. “You’re not even cleared to check out yet.”

“Well,” Zidane turned his head towards him, rustling his hair up. “If you don’t give me some information, I might have to break myself out.”

Marcus shifted in his stool, pressing his hands to his knees. “Not a lot has changed. They’ve started a few burials of soldiers, wherever their family’s wanted.”

Zidane sat up on his elbow. “Who’s been buried?”

“Just Squad Beatrix,” Cinna chimed in. “Two are here on the ground, the rest scattered around the Mist Continent, to family plots or tombs. Steiner’s still working on contacting family of his recruits. Some don’t even have any family left...”

Zidane pressed his chapped and sore lips together. He remembered months ago when he and the Knights of Pluto had been together in the parlor

room. Zidane had been in such awful spirits, his identity crisis throbbing beneath his very skin. Coupled with his learning of Astrid, Zidane remembered that brief moment of looking around the room, wondering if any of them could survive what, he at the time, only thought was anxious delusions. And now, those very soldiers in his memory grayed in the scene, standing out to him like a horrid testimony. He could only blame himself. Everything Zidane touched seemed to wilt beneath his fingertips, just as his creator had hoped. He swallowed roughly. “What about Astrid?”

“Eh, still not talking,” Blank shook his head and stood up to pace a few steps. “Steiner or Beatrix go down every day at four, but she just lays in her bed, doesn’t touch her food — doesn’t even acknowledge anyone, really.”

“Delta and Felicia are dead,” Zidane said. The three Tantalus brothers in the room looked to him. “They were killed in the battle. What are they doing with the other side’s causalities?”

“You know, Dagger,” Cinna held his hands up. “They’re finding next of kin. But with Molly gone...” Cinna furrowed his brow, glancing to Blank and Marcus. “They’ll go to the unnamed plot in east

Alexandria. Man... that place is so creepy. Just a bunch of empty headstones, begging to be engraved.”

“They deserve it,” Blank said, rather callously. “And Astrid deserves to live with it for the rest of her life.”

“Bro, that’s bad karma,” Marcus shook his head. “No matter what’s happened, you can’t go wishing that on anyone. What if that was one of us?”

“It wouldn’t be, though,” Blank told him. “The Trixies was all just some farce for Molly to always be a prick in the side of Boss’ side. They were a mess, not even close to being adequate.”

“Dude,” Cinna said through his teeth, gesturing to Zidane, who only silently looked on.

“Oh, come on, Zidane, you never loved her,” Blank turned towards him and paused for a moment, pursing his lips. “Right?”

Zidane shook his head and sighed. His forehead was already beginning to throb again. “I don’t know, man...” In the next moment, he swung his legs off the side of his bed and rolled his shoulders. “I don’t even know what I think about myself. I couldn’t possibly tell you what I think about Astrid.” He

stood, somewhat unstable on his own two feet. He nearly had to reach for the bed table, but he managed to secure himself. The pants provided by the infirmary were starched and uncomfortable. The white shirt was just a bit too crisp and baggy.

“Where are you going?” Cinna asked, furrowing his brow.

“Down to the stocks, to see Astrid,” Zidane told him, matter of fact. He brushed past Marcus, beginning towards the door like a stiff, unhinged human.

“And the craziness continues,” Blank hunched his shoulders “” Dude, you’re in no condition. And like I said, she ain’t talkin’. You’re wasting your time and your strength.”

“Maybe she’ll talk to me,” Zidane gripped the edge of the door. The stone was cool against his hot fingers. “Dagger deserves some expedience on this. I think it’s best we get this over as quickly as possible.”

“And then what happens?” Blank asked, holding his arms out at his side.

Zidane took in a deep breath, rolling his lips together. “I have no idea. Your guess is as good as

mine.”

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Several maids and fill-in soldiers from Lindblum and Burmecia eyed Zidane tentatively but didn't say anything as he walked past them. His movement was slow, his entire body feeling rough. It felt like he hadn't moved in years. But he continued down each winding staircase, sighing when the next one came into sight. He cursed the architects in that moment. In fact, he cursed everyone, including himself. He was quite out of place as he moved about the castle in his infirmary clothes. Zidane didn't even have shoes on. When he made it towards the dark and dank underground stocks, his feet nearly sizzled against the cool cobblestone. The guards were hesitant to let him continue down the narrow alley with his awkward gait, but still, nobody stopped him. He glanced into each cell. Some were filled with vicious and sinful inmates. Some he recognized from the pubs where Astrid's voice rang out. He should have guessed she would be at the very end.

Her long onyx hair was dirty and fell around her face, which was sweaty despite the frigid temperature of the stocks. She was dressed in a basic beige cotton dress and sat on her bed with her knees

pulled into her chest to cradle her chin. Zidane was winded from the walk and loudly scraped a stool up to the mangy bars, where he sat forward with his elbows on his knees. Zidane peered through the bars at her. She nervously fidgeted with the thin blanket on her cot. When she caught the sight of his dark hair, though, she paused and sat up. Astrid only blinked with a blank expression towards him. She looked unwell, mentally, just by the gaze in her brown eyes. It was hard for Zidane to look at her as he took into account the past they had shared. If only he had known, he told himself. He had always joked she looked like Garnet. What were the odds she was a bastard baby with a taste for cold-blooded revenge? He let out a sigh and lowered his eyes, shaking his head.

Astrid rose from her cot and came slowly to the bars, going into a kneel. Her stained dress flared around her as she only sat a foot away from Zidane with arched eyebrows. Despite everything that had happened, Zidane could still see her inside of her own eyes. Even after what she had orchestrated, what she had said and done, she was still Astrid, after all, with her little doe eyes. Her slender fingers came to grasp the bars. Her nail beds were grimy with dirt. He had come all that way, but was at a loss



of words. He didn't know what he was doing. He hadn't known the course of his own actions for nearly a year at that point. Why did he do what he did? What did he have to prove? Blank had stirred something inside of him. And he knew his brother would only be exasperated by his stupid chivalrous rules to do right by everyone, even when they wronged him. But Blank hadn't known the Trixies like Zidane did. Sure, a lot of it was out of petty revenge, out of a need to have a watchful eye and a protected shoulder. But those girls were orphans, just like they were, and had been given a second chance — even if it was beneath the concrete skyline of Lindblum, in the shadows where purses and wallets were like gold. Astrid had nothing left. No sister's, no mother. She never even had a father. And now, her freedom had been revoked, like everything else in her life.

Zidane sat up straight, pressing his hands against his thighs. "Why?" He asked without thinking.

Astrid pressed her hands into her lap now. She picked so violently at her fingers, they were beginning to bleed. "Did the General send you down here?" Astrid asked, her voice echoing amongst the high, damp, and mossy rafters of the prison. "She's much more direct than the Captain."

He shook his head. “No, I only just woke up from the flu-induced coma you gave me. I came on my own accord.”

“I never meant for you to be caught in the cross fires,” Astrid told him, keeping her eyes trained on him. “You had disappeared. I thought...”

“That I was dead,” Zidane nodded. “Yeah, everyone did.”

“Well, then, what’s *your* story?”

“This isn’t about me, Astrid,” Zidane said, curling his fingers against the starchy fabric of his pants. “This is about *you* and why you’re sitting here a dirty mess in front of me.”

Her eyes became glassy as the crimson blood leaked from the corners of her nails. She bit down on her lip and looked at the uneven stone wall. “My whole life has just been... *damned!* My mother was never affectionate. My father was some bastard who buried his feelings into other people. I’ve always been poor and even poorer at performing in the life of a thief I was born into. And... I was always jealous of you. Of everybody. Even my own sister’s. My mother always had more of an affinity for them, anyway...”

“You didn’t go through with all of this just by your own accord,” Zidane sat forward. “How would you have ever known your father was the King of Alexandria?”

Astrid squeezed her eyes shut as the salty tears began to streak down her face. “I wasn’t aware until the decline of my mother’s health. Well after King Emet’s death.”

“And why was that even relevant? What would Molly have gained from that?”

“I don’t know,” Astrid shook her head. “I guess she saw how depressed I was, especially after you leaving... I suppose she wanted something more for me.”

“Why did you go through with it?” Zidane asked. “Do you even have a clue what it’s like to be a Queen? It’s not all flashy dresses and galas and balls. It’s paperwork, public hearings, listening to the demands of your citizens. It’s always being in the public spotlight, ridiculed for the smallest aspects of your life. You’re in charge of thousands of lives, buildings, jobs — it’s not exactly the life of luxury, as much as people like to paint it that way.”

“I was angry, obviously. At everything,” Astrid told him, slumping her shoulders. “Those tabloids I told you I’d never see... well, I saw them. I read what you were doing. And when I saw Princess Garnet’s name beside yours... it just worsened my emotional state. And my mother was a whisper on my shoulder. I thought after so long, I could finally have it all. I thought everything was air tight until I saw you again that night at the pub. I couldn’t believe my eyes. And I know you didn’t believe yours either.”

Zidane pursed his lips. “I just realized how small of a world it really was.”

Astrid’s crusty, bloody fingers came to grapple the bars again. “You’re telling me that after you left and went upon your mission... you never thought about me again? You never wished for me in the nighttime? Or caught a glimpse of something and thought it would be something I enjoy?”

He was quiet for a moment as he looked at her. Astrid’s eyes seemed so desperate as they peered between the bars. Zidane stared intently at her. “I’m not going to sit here and lie to you, Astrid. My life made a dramatic turn after I left for Alexandria. It became much bigger than just kidnapping a princess.

It became a conquest for world peace and discovering who I truly was. And in the muck of it, when I was injured and lying in the rain, there was no room for you in my mind.”

She stared at him for a moment as the tears fell off the end of her nose, dribbling against her poor dress. “My mother was right. You really were an asshole. You never were good for me.”

“Yeah, Baku was right, too.”

Astrid stood and her dirty feet slid against the prison cell floor as she hugged herself. “The General has already made up her mind. I’m guilty. Why don’t you all just execute me for my crimes, already?”

“Well, it’s not that simple,” Zidane stood up now and let out a sigh as his body ached in protest. “Killing you wouldn’t really make you pay for what you did. Now you just gotta wait. I’m sure Beatrix will find something suited for you. Hard labor... watching the burials of all the innocent people you had killed... or maybe, I dunno... just leave you here to think about what you did. I suggest you start talking like you did for me. It will only help your cause to be compliant.”

“You don’t care what happens to me,” Astrid said, crawling back onto her cot. “You never did.”

Zidane watched as she curled up by her lonesome in her cage once more, going back to her catatonic state. The memories again drifted past him. One of noodles growing cold in alleyways. Long chats in the humid air after a fresh rain. The glinting of that damned garnet against her collarbone. Zidane nearly shook as he recalled of it. Like a personal hell on Gaia. He felt his bones riveting in ways that made him uncomfortable. What could he do, though, to help? As he watched Astrid return to her inner anguish, he was at a loss. She had tried to kill Garnet. She had passively let her sisters die. Sometimes, there couldn’t always be a happy ending. And he thought that for himself, too, as he looked to his own unknown horizon. The chill of the prison was beginning to seep into his skin. He recalled the words he and Garnet had exchanged days ago and his stomach turned upside down. He had done all of this for Garnet alone. But in the end, he couldn’t decide what he wanted. Zidane approached the bars, pressing his hot palms against the iron.

“I did care, Astrid, whether you want to believe that or not,” She was unmoving from the sounds of

his words. “There was a time when all of me was just for you. But everything has to end at some point or another, whether it’s by heartbreak or time alone. I can’t tell you what will happen now. I can’t guess what’s in the future for either of us. I don’t even know what *I* want. But... I think time alone will answer all of our questions.”

He pursed his lips as he peered through the bars and saw she was unresponsive. After a moment of consideration, he walked away to begin his achy and arduous journey back into the castle.

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When Garnet entered the infirmary that afternoon, she was expecting the same ordeal of sitting beside Zidane’s bed with a wandering mind. The past three afternoons, she had spent well over an hour sitting silently at his side. She thought about anything and everything. The sound of shovels sifting through dirt continually echoed through her mind as she watched soul after soul be laid to rest. The hectic whirl of airships were not far behind as her hand had glided down the chestnut caskets containing the lost life of someone returning to their family. Garnet was just winging the next step. It unnerved her to have no plan as she operated like a

robot in her position. But she came to an abrupt halt when she closed the infirmary door behind her. A rather flustered and frustrated nurse was making sharp gestures at Blank, Cinna, and Marcus. The trio was rather sheepish, even somewhat passive. Garnet's heart nearly leapt from her chest when she saw the bed was empty. Her blood ran cold and she walked briskly, her heels clattering against the marble tile.

"Where's Zidane?!" She demanded. The nurse immediately bowed.

"Your Majesty, he's left! And *these* three just let him," The nurse shot them a pointed look. Garnet's heart settled a bit upon hearing this.

"Well, where did he go?" Garnet asked, looking between them. "You don't just sleep in a dazed fever for four days and walk out with no qualms!"

Blank heaved a sigh as he deftly shuffled his deck of cards between his hands. "He went to talk to Astrid. He wants answers just as much as anyone else."

"Probably more," Cinna offered, but the nurse's dark eyes only burned into him more.



“Why didn’t you stop him?” Garnet asked, shaking her head. “He’s not going to be fully recovered just yet. The stocks are a long way to go.”

“You know Zidane,” Blank shrugged. “We couldn’t have stopped him if we wanted. Unless we had sleeping weed.”

Garnet sighed, frisking some loose strands of onyx hair from the frame of her face. She knew Blank was right. Zidane always had his mind set and very little could ever change that. In many ways, she still struggled to completely understand what had happened between Astrid and Zidane in the past. She had her ideas of their parallel childhoods blooming into something more intricate, but she felt she was missing key components to truly get the gist of what took place and what made the entire situation so strained. Garnet had her assumptions, but she knew Zidane had his reasonings. As did Astrid. She only hoped he hadn’t gone down there wielding bulleted sentences. Garnet strove to understand Astrid. In her fragile state, she would easily recoil back from any type of prodding.

“Your Majesty,” a maid appeared in the door, gesturing for Garnet. “There is an audience requesting your presence in the private study.”

“The private study?” Garnet echoed, furrowing her brow. She sighed and pensively ran her palms along her skirt. She knew all too well who would request a meeting in her private study. She pursed her lips and glanced back to the Tantalus trio. “I want Zidane back in his bed resting before nightfall. Auris, please prepare a pain relief powder and some fresh water. Ask the kitchen to please include some bread with his meal, too, along with butter. He needs the nutrition.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” She curtsied and Garnet left without another word.

Cinna let out a low whistle, pacing back to Zidane’s vacant and unmade bed. “It just never ends for that woman. Can’t imagine how she does it all.”

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Garnet paused outside the study for a moment and situated her blouse against her shoulders. Again, she raked the loose strands of hair from her braid away from her clear face and straightened her back. She pursed her lips and took a deep breath. She had some idea of what to expect on the other side of the door, but ready or not, she gripped the knob. The past forty-eight hours of her life whizzed through

her mind, dragging her back through the clustering headaches, the suffocating smoke, and the dazed aftermath. Garnet nearly shivered at the thoughts. She closed her eyes for a brief moment before she pushed through, confronted with exactly what she expected. A stiff Regent Cid gazed out the window towards the ruins that were presented in front of the castle. A rather anxious Hilda fiddled with her pearls as she paced back and forth. They both looked to Garnet in that moment with answer-hungry eyes. Garnet could only stare back as she quietly closed the door behind her.

“Good afternoon,” Garnet greeted them. “I trust your stay has been accommodating, though the garden walks aren’t much of a show...”

“Oh, my sweet cardinal,” Regent Cid crossed the room and paternally wrapped his arms around her shoulders. “Your garden will prosper once more such as mine has. I am only glad my men could be there for you. It gives me great relief to know you’re alright. Sit down, Garnet.” The queen was directed onto the velvet chaise lounge that was situated between two bookshelves. Behind her, Queen Brahne’s dark and moody portrait burned a hole into Garnet’s neck. On instinct, Garnet crossed her ankles and settled her hands into her lap.

“What is going on?” She asked, unable to contain the riveting feeling inside of her. “Is everything alright? Eiko?”

“She’s fine,” Regent Cid told her. “Your Aunt Hilda and I have been chatting and... well, frankly, we’re worried for you, Garnet.”

“Worried?” Garnet arched her eyebrows. Hilda was standing beside Garnet’s desk, her fingers curled around the gleaming dark chestnut. “You’re worried about me in this very moment? I’m sorry, Uncle Cid, I’m sure it’s a greatly placed concern, but I am picking up the pieces of my kingdom at the moment. You will not have need to worry a month from now.”

“As monarchs and high society, we must always face the brunt of destruction, the blame of failure,” Hilda said abruptly from her spot. She shook her head and strode forward, the soft tulle of her headpiece grazing her cheekbones. “And we will always pick the pieces up, darling, but I cannot allow for you to take on all this self-hate. Just when I thought you were finally lifting yourself up, this happens. And it’s so unfair you must continue to be so unhappy when all the necessary preparations and reparations will be made for you.”

Garnet looked between Cid and Hilda before shaking her head. “I’m sorry... I’m not following what you’re saying.”

Regent Cid crossed his arms over his chest, his velvet tunic crumpling across his broad shoulders. “A monarch is only as strong as their heart, Garnet. And sometimes your mind doesn’t know what’s best for your heart. A singular monarch isn’t enough without someone to link elbows with, consult in secrecy, and uphold the unified values of your kingdom.”

Garnet sighed, her eyelashes fluttering, as she looked to the window at the sherbet sky. “I apologize, Uncle Cid and Aunt Hilda... I know your worries are well placed but...” She licked her lips and looked to them, trying her best to remain calm and collected. “This is the absolute worst time to sit me down and talk to me about this. And again, I’m sorry, but just because my parents are gone does not mean you’re responsible for this. I have dutiful soldiers to lay to rest. There is no capacity in my mind to be considering a wedding dress or any type of arrangements.”

“Darling,” Hilda sighed and knelt in front of Garnet as if she was only a young girl who couldn’t

understand. Her fluffy skirt ballooned around her. “Why does everything come before you?”

Garnet’s nostrils flared as she looked to her aunt’s powdered face. “I have a kingdom to think about. Sometimes that takes precedence before myself.”

“You do fine as a Queen, darling, we are not questioning that at all,” Hilda now reached forward, tangling her hands between Garnet’s. “But you’re unhappy, I know it, and after all you’ve been through, you punish yourself for it unfairly.”

Garnet lowered her head, her hands tightening against her aunt’s grip. “I lost many soldiers, majority of them very young... yes, I punish myself rightly.”

“But you must not punish Liam, sending him away so dejected,” Hilda said and Garnet’s dark eyes darted to her immediately, almost bewildered. “You cannot hide from what is right. Queen or not, you do not have final say over your heart, ever.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Garnet shook her head, pulling away from Hilda’s grip. “I do not want to be with Liam. At all.”

“Garnet, sweetheart,” Hilda stood as Garnet paced towards the windows, hugging herself. “I

know Zidane's reappearance may complicate things in your mind, but Liam is the right choice. From the letters he sent his mother, it sounded like things were going swimmingly until the attack. Don't let politics stand in front of what is best for you."

Garnet looked over her shoulder at them. "Isn't this all just politics? An entire marriage arranged to unify the relationships between our kingdoms?"

"With an official arrangement such as this, we'll benefit each other, if you'd rather talk the business side to this choice," Regent Cid offered, his satin gloves coming out at his side. "Lower import taxes. Better infrastructure."

"But that's not all there is to consider," Hilda shot her husband a side eye. "You and Liam are so dashing together, darling. I was a young lady like you once with a heart on my sleeve and passions throbbing. I cannot continue to watch you tear yourself down. I know everything is still fresh, but I want you to consider it. I want you to reach into your soul for an answer, rather than get flustered and bat it away."

Garnet's nails dug into her arms as she looked out the window. Each singed leaf, every bit of ash, brought a terrible taste to her mouth. Or maybe it

was just the taste of her own blood as she gnawed on her tongue. “I’ll think about everything you said,” She replied without looking to the Lady or Regent. “But don’t be upset if it’s not the answer you’re looking for.”

“Well, your mind already seems made up,” Hilda huffed. She crossed towards Garnet, sliding her hands to her shoulders and turning the young ruler towards her. “You know you mean very much to us, right? And that we want nothing but the best for you, right? I just don’t see why now, after all this time, you’re willing to throw away what you’ve forged with Liam. He’s brilliant, darling. And he compliments you very well. This can’t all be about Zidane, is it? He’s a swell young man who I know means a great deal to you, but he cannot be the King, sweetheart.”

Garnet’s dark eyes darted between Hilda’s. “This isn’t all about Zidane. It’s many compounding reasons, Aunt Hilda, that I don’t see fit to discuss.”

“That’s not fair. Give us a chance to understand,” Hilda said.

Garnet turned towards Regent Cid. “Did you ever plan on telling my family about the child conceived outside of wedlock in Lindblum?”



The rulers cheeks turned a bright shade of red and his mustache bristled. Hilda straightened up, watching her husband very carefully now. Regent Cid cleared his throat, crossing his arms over his chest again as if to conceal his sheepishness. The Lady pressed her fists into her hips and her face left him no wiggle room as Regent Cid sighed and slumped his shoulders. “Your father was in a very dark place, Garnet. Everyone thought you were going to succumb to your illness. When you were healthy again, I only wanted to protect Emet. His own health was declining by then and I just wanted him to be comfortable and loved in his final years.”

Garnet stared at him for a beat, lowering her arms to her side. “It seems every secret keeper has their own secret to keep hidden in the dark.”

“What do you mean by that?” Regent Cid asked, arching a bushy eyebrow.

“You do know I’m not the original Garnet Til Alexandros XVII, right?” Garnet asked. Regent Cid and Lady Hilda’s faces curled in their own questionable way. ‘I thought King Emet would have at least confided that in you... “Garnet brushed past them and went to her desk. With an absent mind, she shuffled parchment, ledgers, and journals around.

She shook her head.” Princess Garnet really did die all those years ago.’ She told them, barely looking up. “During her struggle, King Emet conceived Astrid with a woman named Molly. And then Princess Garnet really died and I suppose the kingdom was in a lurch. Queen Brahne wasn’t having anymore children. And King Emet must have been sweating bullets knowing an Alexandros-child was out there. But then... I washed up on the beach with my mother, who had perished. And they took me in. Lucky me I looked just like the original child.”

“Darling, surely you’re just pulling our leg?” Hilda’s eyes were wide open now. “I cannot imagine how this could all be kept from us. Brahne always spoke so highly of you at tea times, like her own flesh and blood.”

Garnet looked over Hilda’s gaudy hat towards the stoic painting of her mother, drenched in furs, clamped in golds. Garnet pursed her lips. “Grief makes people do crazy things.”

“But *you!*” Hilda pointed a sharp, manicured nail at Cid, making the ruler recoil. “You knew about this bastard child and never told me?!”

“Your mouth is as big as Atomos,” Regent Cid scoffed, straightening his cape. “You would have started a class war with that knowledge.”

“There is a reason I told you all of that,” Garnet spoke up, pressing her palms to the desk. “When Astrid was plotting her revenge, she met Liam. And Liam was persuaded into giving me a love potion to affect my mind. That’s why things were going so well in the letters. But in reality... if I had never unknowingly drank that tea, we never would have been more than mere acquaintances that bumped elbows at the ball.”

“He did what?!” Hilda’s jaw was nearly on the floor now.

Garnet brought her hand up. “He didn’t have bad intentions. I guess he really did just like me that much...” Garnet shrugged, her eyes drifting away. “He accidentally stumbled right into Astrid’s plot, though. It distracted me from everything that was brewing. It was a perfect storm, so to say.”

Hilda’s ruby red lips broke into a grin after a moment. “You know it wasn’t malicious, darling. In a way... it’s very cute.”

Garnet looked to her aunt and sighed. “I will make my considerations, but I can’t promise you it will be what you want.”

Hilda shook her head. “It will always be Zidane, won’t it, darling?”

Garnet gazed around the study that over the past months had become a prison cell to her. The sun was beginning to set now, sending swirls of oranges, yellows, and streaks of blue across the sky. Garnet slowly licked her lips, placing her hands behind her back. “Maybe so. But I know better than to try and anticipate the future.”

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

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### Chapter Twenty-Nine

Garnet's stockinged feet were silent against the cool marble as she found her way down the dark hallway. Her onyx hair was piled in a mountain on top of her head, her crisp shirt left untucked from her skirt. The moons were high in the sky now but Garnet didn't feel even the faintest spell of drowsiness. She paused, pressing her shoulders into the wall as a Burmecian volunteer languidly strolled by, glancing up and down at all the decorations he passed. Garnet was quick to dart behind him and up the stairs. The Queen was very careful as she found the door to the infirmary, quietly turning the brass doorknob over. When she peaked her head in, all was silent and unmoving. Garnet slipped through the door and soundlessly closed it behind her. The night watch nurse had left a waxy candle burning on the table by the entrance. Garnet grabbed it and held it close as she crept down the aisle of beds. She could make out the figure of Zidane tucked beneath his covers. She eased herself into the stool beside his bed and watched his motionless face as he

rhythmically breathed. She wondered what he was dreaming about.

Garnet set the candle on the nightstand, watching how the warm orange flame flickered against his soft skin. Garnet folded her hands into her lap, resorted to simply observing him. In the moments she was away from him, it still hadn't quite dawned on her that he truly was here. Flesh and bone, in good health, unharmed. It was mind boggling to her. How had he managed for the past eight months to watch from the shadows without anyone knowing? No matter what, he was always finding a way to pull Garnet out of the inferno that was her life. Never in her wildest dreams had she thought she'd see him again. How was any of this possible? He was her guardian angel, that much she was convinced. It was almost magical that Zidane always came to fruition when she needed him most. She wondered what he had been through after they left him behind at the Iifa Tree. Whatever it was, he didn't deserve an ounce of the trauma and tribulations. Zidane had sacrificed so much. Garnet wondered what she could sacrifice for him. Her heart thundered in her chest as her mind weaved in several directions, entangling itself. What was next? Again, she was only winging it. Garnet yearned for many things, yet she felt a

lingering fear — a fear of rejection, a fear of misjudgment, of having people question her unfairly. She was scared she couldn't have what she truly wanted. Something inside of her told her it couldn't possibly happen. Garnet pursed her lips as she tucked her legs beneath her, running her hands along her skirt. Why couldn't things just be easy? Garnet recalled the time of their travels. In some of those moments, when it was only long stretches of gravel roads or an endless horizon of the ocean, it seemed that things were almost simpler. Every answer seemed to have a place. But now, so much had changed and the puzzle pieces that had once been part of the set, now found themselves awkwardly shifting to make space for themselves yet once more. Again, she questioned what she even wanted or desired. She asked herself if she was even worthy of such a thing.

“I can feel your eyes on me,” Zidane muttered in the next moment and Garnet nearly startled out of her stool. After a beat, he lifted his head, letting out a yawn. “Trouble sleeping?”

“I'm so sorry,” Garnet whispered, frantically looking around the still infirmary. “I thought you were fast asleep.”

“Nah,” Zidane shifted on his elbow and faced Garnet, his blankets rumpling over him. ‘I’ve slept so much for the past few days. I think I’m all caught up.’ He grinned lightly before he paused and tilted his head. “You’re probably way behind, though. What’re you doing up, wastin’ your time staring at me?”

“It’s been hard to sleep recently, you know... with everything that’s happened. I just close my eyes and see the destruction all over again...” Garnet lowered her eyes and shook her head as she fiddled with the cuff of her shirt. “And I’m just frustrated with everybody. Astrid still won’t talk. Beatrix is neglecting the fact her baby will be here within the first quarter of spring. My Aunt Hilda and Uncle Cid still think I should marry Liam...”

Zidane was quiet for a beat before he let out a long sigh and re-situated against his pillows. “You know Liam didn’t understand what he was playing into.”

“But that doesn’t negate the fact he willingly chose to try and brainwash me,” Garnet replied. “And if things hadn’t happened as they did, that would be the rest of my life. I’d be in the clutches of some kind of emotions that never existed inside of



me. I'd spend the rest of my days being lied to... and lying to myself."

Zidane sat up, pressing his elbows to his crossed legs. The blankets tangled around him, his hair fluffy from his rest. The beginning inklings of blond were beginning to break through the roots again. "Dagger, you have to do what's best for you." From behind her, the milky moonlit beams fell around her slender frame, accentuating the onyx hair piled a top her head, precariously pinned down with pearl clips. She almost sighed when she heard her endearing nickname slip from between his lips. "Love potion or not, you're sure that from the duration of knowing him, that you're not interested at all?"

Garnet's eyes were glossy in the low lighting, her eyebrows knitted together. "After all this time, Zidane... things really are so different. I remember a Zidane who used to flirt with me incessantly. One who married me without hesitation in Conde Petie. What's changed?"

Zidane sighed and looked away for a moment, shaking his head. "That was before we started getting into the thick of it... before I realized my part in the whole song and dance. I don't think I'm

good for you, Dagger. Simple as that. Who I was a year ago is a dunce compared to where we are now.”

“You’ve grown as a person, that’s all,” Garnet told him, leaning forward almost earnestly. Zidane’s eyes searched her endlessly. She looked so beautiful, even with her messy hair and disheveled clothes. How dearly he just wanted to give in, but as usual, the invisible hands of his mind gripped his shoulders, drawing him away. Zidane wanted so much that he couldn’t allow himself to have. He wondered, constantly, what was wrong with him. She was right, though. If she had spoken this tenderly to him a year ago, he would have melted on the spot. Zidane had wanted to bond with her so badly. But now he only worried about poisoning her beautiful soul. “Please say something...” Her voice was like smooth velvet running up against him.

He closed his eyes as the memories washed over him. He could feel the cold constricting pain in his stomach as he realized Blank had been petrified. He felt the glimmer of hope as he spoke to Garnet on the breezy balcony in Lindblum. He felt all of Freya’s antagonizing anxiety as he stood beneath the chilling, sharp rain. He remembered he and Vivi laid out beneath the stars on the dry, rigid rocks of Madain Sari. The way Eiko excitedly grabbed his

elbow as the Ifa Tree pulsed around them. Every moment spent with them was precious. Zidane missed all of it so greatly. When he opened his eyes and looked at Garnet, it was almost like he was staring at the tangible form of a warm, comforting home. Of one he had never known.

“Dagger, I...” Zidane’s mouth hung open for a moment before his words charged forward from his lips. “I love you. That much I do know. There wasn’t a day or a night that passed where I didn’t think of you when we were apart. I did this whole stupid act just for you. Because I wanted to redeem myself for you. But... I didn’t.”

“How could you say that about yourself?” Garnet asked, a dark lock falling against the ridge of her eyebrows. “After everything you’ve done for me... Zidane, you’re my guardian angel. I’m convinced you are the only one capable of saving me. I can barely save myself. You’ve done more for me than anybody ever has in my entire life.”

Zidane was quiet as he pursed his lips together. He didn’t know whether to howl with laughter or break down into a sob. “I can’t be the King, Dagger.”

“Says who?” Garnet furrowed her brow.

“Says... *me!*” Zidane held his arms out at his side. “I’m a test tube baby from another planet. I’ve only ever been a nameless orphan on this planet. I couldn’t keep any of you safe. All I’ve ever touched has turned into ash, followed by a parade of chaos. Seriously, Dagger, it’s a million terrible reasons stacked against only one good reason. It’s why I’ve hidden behind a helmet and a cuirass all this time. I didn’t know whether I should have returned or not. Astrid made that decision for me, though.”

Garnet’s eyelashes fluttered as the warm, salty tears began to rim her eyes. She swallowed roughly. How she hated to see him be so hard on himself over circumstances he was never in control of to begin with. The two young people were both so conflicted over their past and anxious as to what awaited them in future days. Garnet licked her lips and cleared her tightening throat. “Was there ever a moment... you know, when you were Zeke, that you thought you didn’t ever want to return to us?” She asked, sniffing in the process.

Zidane came to the edge of the bed now, dangling his legs off the side. “I don’t know...” He shook his head, his brown bangs clawing across his forehead. “To be honest... I got pretty screwed up in the whole split personality thing. Part of me thought you could

just love me as Zeke. I thought I'd been dead for so long, everyone had put their nails in and moved on."

"From you?" Garnet whispered. The moonlight glittered off the tears that now streaked down her cheeks. Garnet shook her head. 'Forgetting you was never an option, Zidane.' Garnet leaned forward and placed her hand over his. "I want to be with you. Now that you're here, I don't want you to ever leave my side. Please, I beg you to reconsider. You *can* be the King. To Hell with the traditions and blood. I threw that from the window long ago, anyway."

The way her warm hand felt against his. It was almost like a fire licking up his skin. Zidane couldn't help but feel foolish in that moment. Only twelve months ago, barely *four seasons*, Zidane would have been in heaven feeling Garnet's skin against him. He had dreamed endlessly of the words that now piled out from her lips. But he had changed, whether either of them wanted to admit it. The Zidane who had returned was not the Zidane who had been left behind. And he cursed himself again, for the millionth time in a year. The Zidane he once knew had always been so eager, so ready to roll with the punches, and find a way to sink into the seams of his way. But now, he couldn't let himself fall into anything. He calculated everything so carefully. And

Zidane hated it. He'd love to return to the days of taking his risks and thinking later. But he knew that wasn't possible.

"Me... a king?" He couldn't manage more than a whisper now as he felt her slender fingers thread through his. "I... it just doesn't sound conventional or even possible, Dagger. You've done right by all your people. You work so hard for all of them. I just think... it'd be blasphemous for someone like me to join you in the seat of the throne. I'm a no one to them. Nothing I've done could ever compare to where I come from, who I actually am. At heart, I'm a thief, a third-tier actor. And at best, I'm the chaos that wrecks this planet of its life."

"You know that's not true," Garnet shook her head, squeezing his hand tightly. "You know just as well as me that the image you're born into, isn't always the person you become."

They looked to each other in that moment. Her eyes were so dark and glossy. They transcended him into many other points of time. He could see those same wet eyes on the shore of the Iifa Tree, coupled with her red cheeks and flaming temper. The first time they had ever truly yelled at each other. The same pair of eyes filled his vision yet again,

surrounded by rigid and corroded rock, carved deeply by generations before. Garnet's onyx hair drifted behind her as she spun around, taking in the writings and drawings that suddenly spoke deeper to her. They had shared so many moments together and silently, both of their minds drifted away as they thought of what they couldn't have and what would never be.

"I can't be the King, Dagger," Zidane told her again. "It's not me. It's not who I'm supposed to be."

"Who are you supposed to be, Zidane?"

"My old self," He replied, lowering his eyes. "But I'm still trying to find it. It wouldn't be fair to the people of Alexandria... and especially not you, Dagger."

Garnet leaned forward now, grasping both of his hands. "I love you, Zidane. I am forever indebted to you. And I will support you all the way through this. We'll find him, I promise." In the next moment, her arms came around Zidane and her fingers frisked through his layered hair. It only took Zidane a beat to close the gap between them, feeling her slender body beneath his palms once more. The faint scent of lilac and potpourri drifted by and he was

reminded of her innocence and of what a treasure she was. His embrace tightened around her and he closed his eyes, feeling a semblance of peace he hadn't felt in well over a year.

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Every day, the mossy and rigid ceiling was growing more and more dull. The tweets of birds made their way through the small barred window above Astrid's cot. She barely roused from where she curled up beneath the thin and ratty blanket. Each passing hour was the same as the last. Nothing ever changed for her. Astrid couldn't find relief anywhere. Sleep was just as tormenting as being awake. There wasn't a single moment for reprieve. All she could think about, all she saw behind her eyelids, were memories of her sisters and her mother. Astrid recalled both the happy times and even the sad times quite fondly. At least there had been people who had known her, who had cared about her. Now, she saw nothing left for her. The only person who sought her out was the heavily pregnant and very poignant General of Alexandria. Astrid didn't feel like she could speak. Every moment her vocal cords vibrated only felt like another nail in her coffin, another reason to feel



guilty. Astrid rubbed at her dry and tired eyes as she pressed her head against her thin, overused pillow. What could she do, though? Astrid sighed as she straightened her legs, the blanket unable to cover her completely.

Continually, she recalled her exchange with Zidane. It made her heart thunder in her chest and her stomach constrict. Astrid wanted to hate him so much. But she couldn't. No matter how much the words of her sisters and mother penetrated her, she thought of him and felt warm. She missed his touch. She missed his smile. Astrid remembered the times she had spent with him, even if briefly in an alleyway, she had always been so comforted by Zidane's presence. Astrid cringed and curled beneath her cover again. She squeezed her eyes shut tightly. She recalled, horribly, all the times she'd told him to screw off. Even when she had dug herself so deep, Zidane was there with his metaphorical shovel, but she had turned him away. And she regretted it deeply. But her mind kept shifting back to the moment she had been shackled and shuffled to her feet. Zidane was ghastly ill, but his words to make her own bed hurt Astrid to her core. How could he say that?

Astrid tightly gripped the frayed edges of her cover and sighed unevenly. She wished she could transport herself back to the moments she spent with him, until that awful winter when he had walked away. Astrid still wanted to fault him for it, but she knew she couldn't. She bit down on her tongue, hating how clean he was from all the sins she tried to pin to him. She could almost smell that faint scent of pine that always clung to him. For a brief moment, the tangy punch of beer washed through her mouth and the steam of stolen udon noodles ran against her chin. Goosebumps puckered along Astrid's skin and she shook her head as the hot tears now surfaced. She sat up and frustratingly frisked her hands through her oily onyx hair. Astrid wanted to forget about all of it. She wished she had never met him. And then she would change her mind all over again. Astrid never wanted to see those cerulean blue eyes ever again. She didn't want to be reminded of those sweet blond locks and the way they boyishly framed his face. Most of all, she didn't want to feel the guilt from his presence.

Astrid lifted her head. Her eyes were throbbing, waxing between dry and itchy and wet and irritable. The tears streaked down her unwashed face, her shoulders rising and falling as she struggled to

contain her breath. All that was left for her was what now surrounded her. A pallet on a musty floor. Uneven bricks, stacked on either side of her. Cold bars. The only visitor was someone who she didn't want to talk to. Astrid doubted that Zidane would ever find his way back down to the damp stocks, where other prisoners groaned in their sleep and chewed with their mouths open on the dry crumbly bread and tasteless cheese that was served. She was all alone now in her crypt. As she recalled her mother, she only felt the same shame she had grown up with. Astrid couldn't seem to do anything right, whether it was swiping a wedding band left carelessly on a picnic bench or buying her mother a present she would like. Astrid was a failure. The tears continued to fall and she could feel a weight coming across her chest. Her entire body was shaking as her grimy nails came across the dirty floor and she staggered to her feet. Astrid wrapped her hands around the bars, which stung her skin.

“Guards!” She cried out. “Guards! I would like a piece of parchment and an ink well!”

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*Dear Zidane.*

Beatrix was quite drained that afternoon as she made her way through the castle. The baby was doing gymnastics in her stomach constantly now, reminding her that soon they would be making their appearance, ready or not. Finding sleep had become quite the hassle, too, as there was no comfortable way to lay with a swollen belly jutting out from her. The weeks until the doctor's projected arrival was single digit now and the General grew more on edge with each passing day.

*I wonder if your eyes will ever read this note. Or if as soon as you know it was written by me, you'll throw it in the trash. But if you're reading it now, please go on.*

Beatrix stopped to thank a Burmecian volunteer for his help. He looked quite tired, but the Alexandrian Castle was on high alert and couldn't spare a single guard route to be abandoned in the moment.

*I know I'm screwed up. But this planet is, too. It has a wicked way about it that likes to break the innocent inhabitants down, who did not ask to even be born to it. I think we're all a little screwed up in our own ways. Some more so than others and displayed in ways different from each person.*

Beatrix paused outside the door to the stocks and took a deep breath, pulling her hair away from the frame of her face. She hadn't even bothered to curl the edges that morning or even apply make-up. She was sure she looked as bad as her aching body felt. Nothing could stop the dutiful woman, though. She had been through worse, she tried to tell herself.

*I never forgave you. I never forgave my mother. And I never forgave myself. And I don't think I ever will. The truth is as hard to bear as cough syrup. I don't want to accept it, even if I know it will help all my ailments. It's just too bitter. You rose above the ashes, while I was forced to sink into it. My own fault, really. But again, difficult to accept. I had so many fantasies for us, so many desires, and it hurts that it never got to play out.*

Beatrix rubbed her hand along her belly fleetingly. She straightened her shoulders, trying to fall back into her role as the fearless General who put up with no squandering, though it felt hypocritical. She pressed her hand to the cool brass doorknob and let herself in, feeling the familiar chilly air of the dank basement hidden beneath the magnificent castle.

*I want to be through with throwing myself pity parties. Maybe I'm inclined to because I never had a birthday party of my own. Even if forgiveness is not something I'm not willing to give out, I wanted to let you know, my heart was always yours. I never stopped loving you, despite how much I wanted to hate you. No matter how ill my mother and sisters spoke of you, it could never stop me from wanting you and constantly thinking about you. And I know it's not what you want to hear because, from what I understand, you and Queen Garnet are quite friendly. And that devastates me, Zidane. You could never be replaced in my heart. But so easily, I'm tossed from everyone's frame of mind.*

Beatrix greeted Breireicht at the entrance of the stocks. He reported that all had been quiet and calm. He also provided the good news that perhaps Astrid would have a confession forth coming, as she had asked for means to write a letter. Beatrix could almost feel a sliver of hope surrounding the whole ordeal that still boggled her mind.

*What's done is done. There is no changing the past. I don't know about you, Zidane, but I live with so many regrets. I was never able to make my mother proud of me. I was never able to keep anyone's attention. And I never got to see my deepest*

*desires play out tangibly. Instead, I'm back at square one again, except this time I'm truly alone. I never fully experienced the definition of loneliness, but it's now the world I live in. I close my eyes and all I see are the people from my past whirling around me. My sister's laughter echoing through my mind constantly. I dream of all the times you touched me, all the times you kissed me and reassured me.*

Beatrix glanced into the cells of prisoners who only laid about in their melancholy ways. Some were murderers, thieves, stranglers, abusers — but in the cells, it was hard to differentiate any of them from the next. They laid on their cots, carved the walls, and curled up in their desolation. Some days, the General felt she identified with these people. She had taken lives before, but somehow, the definition was different.

*I meant what I said that night you came to my cell. You don't care about me. If you think it was chivalrous not hacking my head right off my shoulders on the balcony, you're wrong. It would have saved me from the hell I now live in. I know you want answers. I do, too. I can never truly surmise what made me go through with planning this overtake. It may have been blind rage. Or the fact I simply had nothing to lose. It was doomed*

*from the start, though. I lost more than I ever thought I was capable of. The meager scraps of my life meant more to me than I realized. That's all I can really tell you. I thought I had a chance. But I will always wonder where you went. What you were doing. And all I can do is imagine the missing time lines of your life in a way I would like to see. Of you traveling to all corners of this world, perching on a cliffs edge and looking out over the landscape. And I'd like to imagine you thought of me. That you wanted to bring me there sometime and let me enjoy it. It's the only way I can rest easy, Zidane. But I know I will never sleep well again.*

Beatrix arrived at the last cell, deep in the low-lit stocks. She had been preparing her words and interrogation the entire way, but as she turned to look through the grimy bars, she became completely still. She rushed forward, gripping the cool steel and grounding her teeth together. “Breireicht! The key! Right now! Bring the key, dammit!” Beatrix yelled down the long, narrow hallway. The cells became aroused by the General's urgency and they began hollering and reaching through their cells. The assistant captain was racing down the hallway, fumbling with the keys attached to his belt. When he joined Beatrix at the cell and glanced in, he began



cursing himself as he shakily tried two keys before finding the right one. Beatrix raced in, but stopped, knowing there was nothing more for her to do. From the barred window, there was a blanket tightly knotted through. Beatrix's eyes followed each crease and rumple in the fabric until it found its way twisted around Astrid's neck, where she dangled motionless against the wall. Beatrix took a deep, uneven breath, running her hand roughly against her cheek. She turned away from the horrid scene and her boot accidentally kicked over an ink well. The dark onyx liquid fell between all the uneven crevices of the mossy floor. Beatrix noticed the note and carefully took it into her hands.

It had no tangible reasoning. Nothing satisfying. Only the cry of a tormented young woman, trapped in an inferno that she had constructed around herself.

# Chapter Thirty

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## Chapter Thirty

The wind whistled across the open plains. The air was chilly and rigid against the skin. The first flakes of the winters snow was beginning to dance through the air. Zidane looked out over the massive plain lands that lead towards the tall mountain range, onward to Lindblum. Alexandria looked magnificent in the distance. His brown hair whipped around the frame of his face, his hands curled into fists from where they were jammed in the pockets of his black jacket. He didn't want to turn around. The creaking sound of a forgotten iron wrought gate ground each one of his nerves. Distantly, he could hear low voices that did not wish to disturb the peace. The sounds of shovels and pick axes at work. Zidane squeezed his eyes shut, letting out a long winded sigh. As he recalled the last eight months of his life, he couldn't help but feel like a massive fool. He had treaded backwards, if that was even possible. There was simply no shutting down who he truly was. He caused havoc anywhere he went. He created destruction and chaos. He broke hearts and was too rough, though he tried so hard to be tender. Zidane

couldn't shake it. The hood of his coat skimmed his neck, sending a shiver down his spine. He blinked rapidly, determined he did not want to cry. Beyond the rocky ridge from where he stood, he saw free Chocobos grazing, little imps skirting about. He saw the freedom of the world around him despite feeling as if he had shut himself into a cell and thrown away the key. He was still in that moment as the wind ripped around him. He pursed his lips, an uncomfortable stewing coming about his stomach.

Zidane was startled in the next moment, however, as a hand came to touch his arm. Zidane hunched his shoulders and turned around to see Garnet, wrapped in a furry brown coat. Flakes of snow were caught in her onyx hair and she looked to him with concerned dark eyes. Her face said so much despite not saying any words at all. Behind her, Zidane saw the graveyard of Alexandrian citizens with no families. The tombstones were becoming eroded from the shifting ground. Some were painstakingly blank. Beneath the ground, several nameless people lie. But they weren't nameless, Zidane reminded himself. They had been people with entire lives, with people who had loved them, experiences that defined them. But they were left to decompose all alone, without a single thought to go with them. It made him shiver.

Garnet hugged herself, glancing to where Steiner dictated letters to an engraver. Astrid now lay with her sister's, forsaken to the same reality. Buried without a trace, along a path no one ever ventured. She, too, would become forgotten, like the countless others laid to rest. Zidane felt rather sheepish as he dipped his head and scuffed his boot along a jagged rock protruding from the ground.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Garnet said softly as the wind carried her braided hair behind her. "It's hard losing people you know, no matter how far you may have drifted apart."

"You'd think I'd be used to it by now," Zidane replied, looking to her. "But for some odd reason, it never gets easier."

Garnet shook her head. "I don't think death is supposed to be easy, Zidane."

He nodded and looked back towards the plains, licking his lips. "Thanks for not letting her be a nameless grave. After everything she did to you and the castle... you really are empathetic."

Garnet hugged herself and stepped along the rocks. "In a way, I can't say I blame Astrid. She really did have a rightful claim to the throne.

Though... I can't say I would have chosen the method she had. Laying her to rest was more difficult for me than I thought. She was truly the last Alexandros. She was all that was tangibly left of the bloodline that is now mine to inherit." Garnet paused and looked towards her kingdom. Zidane could only watch her as the snowflakes danced around her. She looked so beautiful, but all he could feel was regretful and sorry. 'Some days, I see that as a burden. Others, as an honor. But I have to remind myself to keep doing what I had always done... before I had discovered the truth.' She looked over her shoulder at him. "We both have to, Zidane."

Zidane joined her at the edge before the rigid decline in the landscape. Together, they stared at Alexandria. The faithful crystal glinted off the overcast day. Zidane didn't know what he was feeling. It was overwhelming, riveting against his skin. He wanted so much for everything to be different, but Zidane felt utterly powerless and exhausted to do anything about it. What did he want? It was a question he struggled to answer. He wanted to be with Garnet, naturally, but still, a force held him back. He couldn't give in to loving her wholly. Zidane was sure he'd only be her downfall.

The citizens of Alexandria could never understand or welcome someone such as himself to the throne. She deserved someone better. Someone who didn't dig up the past and hurt her. Someone who wouldn't cause a decline in her favor rate. It was frustrating as he tried to recall the path his life had been on before Baku told them of the mission. He was on a path to nowhere, he told himself. Now, he was at the end of the road and he didn't know where to turn. He was daunted by the idea of forging himself a new path. Zidane was an utter mess.

“What will you do now?” Garnet asked with her velvet voice, as smooth as rose petals. Zidane felt his stomach constrict. “Winter is about to start... you don't plan on traveling, do you?”

“I don't know,” Zidane said, without looking to her. “I guess I just need time to think about everything.”

Garnet turned to him, reaching for his arm again. Her slender gloved fingers burned him through his coat. “Will you stay at the castle, please? That way I know you're okay.”

Zidane took in a deep breath, pressing his hand over hers. Still, his eyes remained glue towards

Alexandria. “For now, yes. If that’s all you’ll ask of me for the time being.”

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Just beyond the window, a fine layer of snow was falling across the bruised Alexandrian garden. An owl hooted loudly, breaking Steiner’s concentration. He had been glued to Vivi’s writing, recalling fondly of the young Black Mage as he read his thoughts, his philosophical journey, his research. It had been the same scene for Steiner each night. A fire cackled in the fireplace beside him and he blinked rapidly, looking across the room to where Beatrix lounged. She had been quiet all evening as she worked on writing obituaries of her soldiers to send on to their parents and family. She wanted them to know that the fallen soldiers had the General’s respect, that she wished them well, and that she was sorry. Beatrix’s fingers curled around the quill as she paused, pressing a hand to her forehead. She couldn’t justify her survival. And she felt even more conflicted as her elbow brushed against her swollen belly. A whole new life was brewing. It took so much time, it seemed. But only a blink of an eye to end another. In her youth, she would have felt rather cocky to surface unharmed from squabbles and battles. But

now, it only made her question herself. Did she do everything that she could? Beatrix sighed and lifted her head to look out the window, but did a double take when she realized Steiner's eyes were on her.

“Anything promising in the journals?” She asked, dipping her quill into the ink well.

Steiner situated himself in his chair, letting out a long sigh. “Every page is gold. I wouldn't have expected anything different from Vivi. He was brilliant. And that brilliance made it to every letter.” Beatrix smiled weakly, again floundering into her tangled thoughts of what it meant to live and die. Her eyes sank towards the unfinished work in front of her as the flames of the fire licked against her skin. ‘Are you alright?’ She perked up and gazed across the room at him. “I'm sorry... that's not really a good question right now.”

“I could ask the same of you,” Beatrix laid her quill down and crossed the room, easing herself down on the arm of his chair. Tenderly, she wrapped her arm around his shoulder and sighed as she fell against him. Magnetically, his hand was attracted to her stomach. It would only be weeks until he would hold their child in his arms. He was excited and frightened all at the same time. Steiner couldn't even



begin to guess what it meant for him and Beatrix. So much happened, the Captain got whiplash just thinking about the past eight months of their lives. The good times had been great. But the bad times had been utter disasters. He was sure they'd weather whatever was thrown at them. But at what cost? Beatrix pressed her cheek against his head, her fingers gently grazing his short cropped hair. "I wish we'd get a break... I used to be so accustomed to life never slowing down. Always on the move, looking for the next job. But for just a moment, I want to sit down and be content with everything."

Steiner transferred Vivi's books to the table beside him, coaxing Beatrix into his lap. He remembered when he had first met her as she rested her head against his chest. His eyes had been spinning as he lifted his dazed head to be confronted with the end of her sharp sword. Beatrix had been so fierce, naturally unafraid of anything. Now, beneath his arms, was a vulnerable Beatrix. A Beatrix who finally could admit she was only human. Steiner looked towards the fire, gently caressing her hand. After a beat, he looked to her with a smile. "Were you able to be content in that silent moment?"

She managed to grin back. "Sometimes I wish my mind would just shut up. But there's so much to

think about, Steiner. Like... what will happen now for Alexandria? We will never have a true reason for Astrid's motive. We have to rebuild the barracks and our teams. And Zidane... I'm worried for him, Steiner. He's not in the right frame of mind."

Steiner sighed and hugged her tighter. "Do you ever stop to think about yourself?"

"How can I when there's so much going on around me?"

"Beatrix, your entire life is about to change. You have things to think about, too."

Beatrix lifted her eyes to stare at him. Her lips curled as she observed the endearing face she had come to know so well. Two years ago, Beatrix would have scoffed at the idea of ever falling in love with Steiner. She considered him a clumsy dolt, unfit to rise through the ranks as he had. But she had been a foolish person, encapsulated in her desire to be impenetrable and undeterred. An effect her mother's weakness had on her own conscious. Beatrix realized she needed Steiner, probably more than he needed her. He was her anchor, her tether to a world where it was okay to admit you weren't fine. Her link to an atmosphere where it was okay to ask for help, to be unafraid to share your feelings and

inner ruminations. Life always seemed to have a funny way about it, working in the most mysterious ways. As the fire warmed the back of her neck and she felt Steiner's hand pressed firmly to her stomach, the General realized she shouldn't have been fighting everything so hard. She couldn't control the ways of life, it all happened on its own accord. The universe laid its pieces and Beatrix had to learn to roll with it, whether she liked it or not. She simply had to keep her chin up.

"I've thought of a name," Beatrix said quietly. "If it's a girl, that is..."

"Let's hear it," Steiner grinned.

"Valora," Beatrix told him. "Because I imagine she will be much more courageous than I ever was. Two fold that of my mother. The women of my family, I want every generation to only grow stronger."

"Valora Steiner..." He echoed, tilting his head back. "I like it. I like it a lot. So much so, lets not even brainstorm boy names."

This sent Beatrix into a roll of laughter and the sound was like music to Steiner's ears. "I'm *huge*,

though. It's wishful thinking it will be a girl, Steiner. I guess that's just what I want."

"Well, if she's anything like her father, I'm sorry in advance," Steiner said, resting both hands on her belly now. "I had a big head."

Again, Beatrix laughed and then sighed, looking out the window at the gentle snow drifting down. "Maybe that's what I've been scared of all this time, Steiner... The delivery is so unnerving. It's unpredictable. Anything could happen. I could bleed to death. The pain could be worse than anything I've ever known."

"You'll be assisted by the best doctors, nurses, and mid-wives the castle has to offer," Steiner assured her. "It's the same mid-wife that delivered Princess Garnet all those years ago for Queen Brahne. We won't let anything happen to you."

"Do you promise?"

Steiner looked towards her doe eyes. The Captain felt it was almost an honor to know Beatrix this intimately. That the woman who could single handedly strike down an army of hundreds, could lay in his lap and be so vulnerable with him. He knew she was more than capable of taking on the

world by herself. But it meant everything to him that he could finally stand by her side, differences pushed elsewhere, to make room for the newly cultivated lives they had carved for themselves. Little by little, he watched her open up. Despite being so unafraid, she seemed hesitant to ever let someone in. Steiner chalked it up to the line of work she had chosen. Beatrix rarely spoke of her childhood, but he knew her father was a festering sore on her life. Every day, though, it seemed she was waning towards the idea of the baby. Steiner was over the moon about his first child. He only wanted the same for Beatrix. He saw she was trying and that was enough to assuage his anxieties and blame for the situation he put her into.

He brought her knuckles to his lips, gently grazing them. "I promise, Beatrix. Both you and Valora."

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Zidane was almost like a ghost of a person, listlessly wandering about the castle to find any means to distract himself. However, he always turned down a game of cards, marbles, or chess with the volunteers on break. He never wanted to join Garnet in the private study to keep her company

while she worked. Even the gardeners attempted to make him part of their projects of revitalizing the soil in anticipation of a harsh winter. Every morning, he'd take breakfast by himself. Dry toast, black coffee, maybe a few raspberries. Then he wandered about, only giving passive nods to people. Eventually, he would be found in the sitting room in the far east wing, where Freya had presented her idea of his memorial. There he'd sit on the couch and stare out the window at the falling snow, glistening gently. So much was running through his mind, he often didn't even know what to think about. But he tried to itemize it hour by hour.

Garnet crossed his mind the most frequently. His love for her, his desire, only swelled with each day. But he felt so incomplete, it would be wrong to pursue anything with her. His heart soured at the idea that she was a Queen. He had no business joining her on the throne. If she had been anything else in the world, maybe it would have been feasible. They could have worked on him together. But he couldn't ask her to do that and balance an entire kingdom on her shoulders. He knew he was only hurting her more, reminding him he was failing every waking second of his life. Zidane sighed, pressing his head into his palm as a gust of wind

sent flurries into the gold paned windows. Who was he? Sometimes Zidane's mind answered Zeke Tisdoll. He had done a much better job at pleasing people, anyway. But he needed to think objectively about Zidane Tribal. Who did he want to be now? The world seemingly was at balance again. With all the noble sacrifices to make it to that point, Zidane was surprised he wasn't one of them. Some nights, he dreamed about Astrid successfully overtaking him that fateful night. Garnet would have seen his face and his death all within a moment. He imagined tumbling from that balcony into the abyss. He shook his head of the thoughts, though, desperately shutting them down.

Astrid's suicide ground against his nerves. The letter was like a pike sent through his heart. He had no romantic residual feelings for her, but felt that he had failed one of the street kids he'd grown up with, stuck in the same predicament beneath the iron skyline of Lindblum. If she had held out, maybe there still would have been something left for her. A life of servitude, perhaps, but one with hope. Garnet wouldn't have punished her forever, she was far too just for that. The Alexandros blood that ran through her veins had dried up beneath the rocky, rigid ground outside the walls of the Alexandrian Castle.

And Garnet, as usual, was left to pick up the pieces. Zidane felt like he had caused the mess, too. His teeth ground together in that moment. Why hadn't he just left her alone? Why did he feel the need to seek her out? He blamed himself for Astrid's actions. He could have intervened, but he didn't. He kept on in his imaginary world, pretending everything was okay, that everything would work out.

Briefly, Zidane considered returning to Tantalus. His brothers still went out to bars, had sticky fingers, did theater, and all the things he had grown up remembering. He thought maybe returning to the city he grew up in would give him less reason to grieve. He would be under the radar of guilt, which he thought couldn't possibly follow him across a mountain range. Zidane grew doubtful at that thought, however. They were his family, though. And he knew Blank pined for him to go home. Could he seamlessly fall back into line with them? They knew what he'd been through. Zidane was certain they'd accept him scarred and bruised with open arms. He pursed his lips. Could he just simply go back to being a petty thief? He felt he had shed that persona during his journeys. To the friends he had made, they perceived him as someone else



entirely. Being a thief was the cause of the entire domino effect. Zidane wasn't sure he could return to that life again and sighed in frustration.

Anxiety riveted against his skin as he wondered what options were left for him. He shot down everything he considered. Terra being destroyed almost seemingly destroyed a part of him despite being unaware of the linkage for so long. If Kuja hadn't cast him down to Gaia in blind jealousy, where would he be now? Would he have actually been a successful Angel of Death? Garland had purposely created him with emotions and perception. If Zidane had stayed on Terra, would he have blindly followed Garland's lead? He wanted to answer no. But he'd have none of his experiences on Gaia. Zidane shivered at the thought. In a way, Kuja had done him a great favor. But Zidane felt as if he was throwing it all away as he collapsed into the cursed emotions instilled in him. His mind rounded back to Garnet, back to square one, and he could only clench every muscle in his body.

Zidane could only hope with spending the winter in the Alexandrian Castle, something would fall onto his plate. An idea, a revelation. Anything that would make him want to be Zidane Tribal again. But

for the time being, he could only feel wide-open, almost naked, without the guise of Zeke Tisdoll.

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Garnet sighed as she sealed yet another envelope. She went through the process of heating the wax and stamping it shut officially. She tossed it into the sack of outgoing mail and took a moment to approach the windows. A fine layer of frost now covered the mossy cobblestone of the garden. The team of gardeners had been dutiful in hacking down the crisp foliage in hopes of creating a new vibrant garden come spring. Garnet shivered at the thought of the early spring. She'd be eighteen. It was hard to imagine that just a year ago, she had been so lost, confused, and heartbroken. That she pined for someone who was in her own garden, in her private study, right there, always, just as he had promised. Garnet closed her eyes for a moment before she went to the velvet chaise lounge. She seated herself stiffly, crossing her ankles and placing her hands in her lap as if someone was watching. The ticking clock on the mantle reminded her someone was. Garnet looked to the gloomy portrait of her mother that hung above the fireplace. She was judging her, Garnet could feel it. But Garnet couldn't help it.

She didn't want some fancy boy from a kingdom of high regard. Garnet didn't want some pompous man with slicked hair and belt-ridden jackets to prance about the kingdom and dangle her from their arm. All she wanted was Zidane. Garnet was so gravely worried for him. He was damaged and bleeding. But she seemed to lack the tools to piece him back together to his former self. She considered briefly that he was just a vase. Once you broke it, it would never be perfect again, even if it was reforged with the finest gold, which she tried to consider was her love. All she, and anybody could do, was watch him flounder and doubt himself. He shoved them away, just as he had done in Pandemonium. Zidane was always so bullheaded. He wanted to lick his own wounds in the darkness and shut out everyone he loved until he felt worthy. It simply was not fair.

Garnet closed her eyes again, transporting herself to another time in her life. One of tweeting birds and hooting owls. She could almost feel the dry, golden rays of Conde Petie on her skin. She recalled the goblins twisted accents, but also their welcoming friendliness. Garnet could hear the bag pipes and oddly shaped flutes from the ceremony as she stood beside Zidane in their desperate attempt to get through the town and onward to their task at hand.

She had seen it all as business. Zidane's fair skin had been flushed from the hot sun. But she recalled his smile, his pupils almost dancing, as he gleefully agreed to the goblins misunderstood ritual. The young ruler at the time didn't want to think anything of it, sheepishly rolling his comments off her shoulders and turning her head away bashfully at the thought. Garnet regretted every moment in Conde Petie so much now. She wished she had given him that kiss at the altar instead of flipping her hair towards him and sauntering off. Now, she'd give anything to be his. Even the throne. But the newly formed, ever-calculating Zidane would never allow her to back down from the fate she was gifted. If only, though, she had given herself more wholly to him. Trusted him more. Because now, he was the only thing she could count on in the unpredictable world. Zidane always kept to his word, as he had proven time and time again. Garnet wished she could have known what was to become of them. She cursed herself for her foolishness.

The door of the private study opened and Garnet was severely startled, recoiling back on the lounge as if her thoughts had just culminated into a physical entity. But all she saw was Steiner at the door, who bowed, and closed the door behind him. He set a

black satchel on the ground, coming forward. “I apologize, Your Majesty. I did not mean to interrupt your meditation.”

“No, it’s fine, Steiner,” She sighed, coming to her feet. She smoothed her black velvet skirt out and returned to the table of letters that desperately needed to be sent to her citizens. All she could do, however, was press her palms to the surface, every muscle of her body riveting with emotion. “I needed to get back to work.” She said, despite not feeling an ounce of motivation in her.

“I hate to ask...” Steiner placed his hands because his back. “But do you know where Zidane is?”

The way his name seared into her, it made her hurt in every way imaginable. He was here. He was tangible. And yet, Zidane felt like he was a million miles away from her. She pursed her lips and glanced fleetingly over her shoulder. “The sitting room in the east, I suppose. He goes there every afternoon and doesn’t speak a word.”

“Your Majesty,” Steiner came beside her, placing his familiar paternal hand to her shoulder. “I do not wish to see you so upset. I know everything lately is

so hard to accept, but I cannot allow you to blame yourself.”

The hot tears finally arrived in her eyes and she wanted to curse like a sailor. Garnet looked to Steiner, her eyelashes fluttering. “I am failing, Steiner.”

“You are doing no such thing.”

“I’m failing Zidane,” Her voice croaked. “What kind of friend am I allowing him to suffer in silence?”

“There’s very little you can do for someone who does not know how to help himself,” Steiner told her coolly. “He needs time, Your Majesty, that’s all. Please try not to take it personally.”

Garnet rubbed fiercely at her reddened cheeks now. “Zidane deserves so much more than this. I wish he didn’t blame himself. I miss the old Zidane, Steiner. The one who could always find the light in the darkness. The one who always found a reason to keep moving when the rest of us wanted to breakdown and wallow. I can’t be for him what he was for me. And that... that hurts me.”

“It’s all with due time, Your Majesty,” Steiner reiterated. “We are all processing things. And we

have to do that on our own terms. He'll come around, I'm certain."

Garnet's lips trembled as she held them together. Her heart thundered in her chest. "I love him, Steiner. But he... can't love me back."

"That's not true," Steiner told her, shaking his head sadly. He hated to see her so upset. Steiner wanted to believe this was all only temporary. He spoke from his heart, though, and could only pray it was the truth. Especially for Garnet's sake. She deserved to be happy after so long. Zidane, too. "I know that Zidane does love you... very much so. But with love also comes a care that must be taken into account. He is only trying to protect you, Your Majesty."

"I don't want him to protect me," Garnet went to the window again, pressing her lips together tightly. 'I want him to stand beside me. We can protect each other better that way.' She shook her head, frustration exuding from her. "He doesn't want to be the King, Steiner. And I understand it's a big role but... if there's ever to be a king for Alexandria, it has to be him." Garnet looked to Steiner. "I'll take no substitutions."

“Your Majesty?” Steiner placed his hands behind his back, sensing words had gone left unsaid.

The snow outside had begun falling more rapidly. Garnet sighed. “I hate to use this phrase but... it’s just not fair, Steiner. He loved me for so long. Through all my angst and late growth. He always showered me in approval when I did nothing but turn him away. I was too childish, too scared, to give into anything. I thought I was only putting my kingdom and mission at risk. And now... I love him, I feel like I can’t live without him. And he seems to be able to take it or leave it. Like I was able to all those seasons ago.” She turned to him, her onyx hair glowing in the bright snowy day behind her. “I was such an idiot, Steiner. I turned him away when I needed him most.”

“And now... he’s doing the same,” Steiner said. “I’m on my way to see him, Your Majesty. I’ll find more out.”

“What are you going to see him for?” Garnet asked, watching as he picked his satchel up and slung it onto his shoulder.

“To be a friend,” Steiner replied, simply. Garnet’s hands fidgeted together and after a moment, she let



out a small laugh and looked towards the window.  
“Your Majesty?”

“It’s nothing, I’m sorry,” Garnet shook her head.  
“It’s just... so much has changed, Steiner.”

He grinned rather crookedly. “I know, Your Majesty.”

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When the door to the sitting room opened, Zidane stiffened and held in a sigh. All he wanted was to be undisturbed so he could give in to his thoughts. Didn’t the people of the castle understand he had a lot to process and work through? He was beginning to rethink the invitation of staying in Alexandria. All the young man wanted was some peace and quiet. The snow flurries just beyond the window shifted back and forth as the wind picked up. He could almost feel the chill seeping in through the glass panes. Zidane looked over the back of the couch, however, when he heard the familiar shifting of armor. Steiner was setting a leather satchel on the table and rustling through it.

“Zidane, I’m glad I found you,” The Captain said as he withdrew a worn ruby red leather bound journal. “I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“You are,” Zidane told him with a voice that lacked rhythm. He turned to look back at the windows.

Steiner paused for a moment, pursing his lips. “I thought you’d be interested in reading Vivi’s journal about the Black Mages and Genomes.”

Zidane perked up and stood now, smoothing his dark cargo pants. “Mikoto sent his work? So that means...?” He stopped himself and the two men only looked at each other.

Steiner nodded. “Yes, unfortunately. But what Master Vivi has left is invaluable.”

Steiner held the book out towards Zidane, but he made no move to accept it. All he could do was stare at it. The journal had been loved immensely. The edges of the hard bound cover were fraying in the corners from being tucked into crevices, shoehorned on shelves, and carried constantly. He could see the edges of the pages were beginning to turn yellow from age and being out in the elements. Zidane could briefly imagine Vivi tucked beneath a large tree on the outskirts of Black Mage Village, dutifully making his notes, and watching as the Black Mages and Genomes learned about the odd world together. Zidane sighed now and came forth, pressing his

hands against the rigid leather. In a way, it sent an energy through him, piquing his curiosity as he turned it in his hands, the smell of the dry desert wafting by.

“I think you should read it,” Steiner told him. “It has helped me immensely with grieving. I think it may aid you, as well.”

Zidane’s hands gripped the book tightly and he looked to Steiner through his disheveled brown bangs. “I... I don’t think I could even make it through the first page, Steiner.”

“It was hard for me at first, I will not deny it,” Steiner replied, folding his hands behind his back in his diplomatic way. “But you loved Vivi as much as I did. His writing is enrapturing, Zidane. I am forever grateful he wrote his thoughts down for us. It will certainly aid me in continuing his work.”

Zidane ran his tongue along his teeth for a moment. “So, that’s what you’ll do now? Continue Vivi’s work for the Black Mages?”

“I feel I don’t have a choice, but I’m honored.”

Zidane looked down at the worn cover of the journal. There had once been leaf gold embroideries etched in an elaborate way, but now much of it had

chipped away to only empty pressings. Zidane's eyes throbbed just looking at it. All the time he could have spent with Vivi was gone now. The world simply kept turning, not caring who it gnashed into the teeth of time itself. He couldn't be surprised, though. Vivi wasn't doing well the last time he spoke with him. But Zidane guessed somewhere deep inside, he had hope Vivi would have pulled through and proven everyone wrong. Zidane swallowed roughly and looked to Steiner.

"I'll read it," Zidane told him. "As much as I can in one sitting."

"I thought it may help you," Steiner said, a hand coming out at his side. "Maybe to remember the good times. Maybe to find some semblance of peace. We're worried for you, Zidane."

The young man sighed and put the journal on the table beside the couch. He only shook his head, sheepishly jamming his hands into his pockets. "It's not necessary, Steiner. We all have our own ordeals to work out. You shouldn't be worrying about me. You should focus on Beatrix."

"She is fine," Steiner replied. "Anxious, like I am, but fine. But I worry you may do something

rash, Zidane. Something that could upend the life you've worked so hard to cultivate."

"And what do you care?" Zidane looked towards him with his hunched shoulders. "Come spring, you'll have a family to look after and worry about. What do I have any business overshadowing that?"

"Her Majesty... she needs you," Steiner said gently, alarmed by Zidane's sharp tone.

"No, she doesn't," Zidane was quite frank. "She thinks she does, but all I am is the poison on the shelf for her."

"You know nobody agrees with that statement," Steiner said dryly. "I know a lot has happened and you have a lot to deal with, but I cannot stand idly by and allow for you to self-sabotage yourself, Zidane. After everything you've accomplished, everything you've done for our friends and me, I will not allow you to walk out on all your hard work."

"I can't be the King, Steiner. It'd be blasphemous," Zidane paced across the room, his face contorted in a near disgust. "There are rules and regulations to becoming a king. Dagger can't expect

me to waltz in and take up the throne. It'd be social-suicide for the order of the kingdom."

Steiner was quiet for a moment, watching the back of the tense Zidane. He took in a slow breath, bringing his shoulders up. "Is that what you're worried about? Class action? There is nothing ordinary about the Alexandrian Throne, Zidane."

"Well, I still don't want it."

"What *do* you want?" Steiner asked. He was silent a beat before he licked his lips. "Whatever you tell me, I swear, no other ears will hear, Zidane. I'm speaking to you as a friend."

Zidane visibly relaxed at these words, tilting his chin up to watch the winter storm outside hasten with covering the city in a delicate film of snow. His heart and mind waned in two different directions. Slowly, he turned towards Steiner. In that moment, he recalled all the history between them. Always constant was the sound of that shifting armor. The sound of Zidane's laughter with his off beat nicknames that turned the man's face red. But Zidane remembered all the times Steiner had come through for him. When he had been there to talk sense into him. Be endearing, a friend that would echo through a lifetime. Zidane bit down on his lip

and tasted copper before he eventually sighed and slouched his shoulders.

“I want to be with Dagger, yes, are you happy?”

“No,” Steiner shook his head. “Because that doesn’t entirely answer my question.”

Zidane felt his whole body emanate with heat. “Steiner, are you serious?” He threw his arms out at his side. ‘I’m just a low-life. I was created to destroy this whole world! With my upbringing, do you think I was *ever* prepared to be asked to be a king of a nation!? Do you think I could just magically know what to do!? I love her, yes, but there comes a moment you have to stop and evaluate who we are. And me?’ He laughed and shook his head. “I was never meant to be royalty, Rusty.”

Steiner could almost smirk at the nickname that had become endearing to him, but he kept his face solidified as he looked over the anguishing young man. “You know that’s now how we think of you, Zidane. Who you were born to be doesn’t matter an ounce. But you’ve still failed to answer my question. What do you want for yourself?”

Zidane was agitated now and ground his teeth together, raking his hands through his hair. “I want

to be with Dagger, that's what I want. But it's just not possible."

"But it is."

"No, it's not!" Zidane's voice was raspy as it rose now and he paced as his body riveted with anxiety. "The only way I can be with Dagger is to take the throne. But I can't do it, Steiner. I don't *want* to! I was never meant to be a king!"

Steiner stared at him a moment before he cleared his throat and shuffled his boots. "You should read Vivi's journal. It may bring you some clarity. I'll leave you alone now." Steiner gathered his satchel from the table and cast only a fleeting glance at Zidane before he saw himself out.

Zidane was alone again in the spacious sitting room with high vaulted ceilings. That's how he preferred it, he thought, but suddenly, he felt more alone than ever. His thoughts were bursting against his skull, anger and desolation grinding his bones. He was breathing heavily, he realized, seconds after the door soundly shut. What did Steiner know, he wanted to argue. But his mind only offered that he knew a lot. He closed his eyes for a moment, unevenly exhaling. Zidane paced about before his eyes fell back to the journal. He was stiff as he came



towards it, taking it into his hands, feeling the gritty embroidery of the binding. Vivi had always been so knowing, whether he realized it or not. No matter how much he questioned his existence, he always found a way to speak to his friends and help them through their own internal quarrels. Zidane's fingers tenderly ran along the uneven pages stitched into the book. He let out a long sigh and found his place again on the couch. Zidane glanced fleetingly at the snowstorm outside before he carefully opened the book. He was greeted by ink that was faded, but still legible, and he took a moment to marvel at his friend's handwriting. Zidane's was chicken scratch compared to it. He could feel all the strings in his heart come undone and he made himself vulnerable as he read the first line. In Vivi's voice, naturally.

*The sun came out today. And together we all drifted from the shade to hold our face's in its beams.*

## Chapter Thirty-One

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### Chapter Thirty-One

Zidane barely glanced up as the maid gently set his coffee cup on a saucer, sliding a ramekin of freshly washed raspberries beside his toast. He was completely enraptured with Vivi's journal. He wrote everything so beautifully, so utterly eloquently. Zidane could almost envision himself alongside Vivi as he wrote about his most favored moments of the day. He especially liked reading about the thoughtful friendship Vivi had forged with Mikoto. It seemed she was a quick learner and very eager to work with Vivi. He crunched into his bland toast still completely absorbed in the writing. Vivi had become an avid book collector in Zidane's absence. Zidane could only imagine the look on Mikoto's face the first time Vivi had taken her to Daguerreo. She must have gaped upwards at the tall spiraling roof. She probably didn't care an ounce as her boots trekked through the running water that was as clear as a spring. Alien or not to the world, the Library of Daguerreo was mesmerizing with its mossy walls and intricate balconies that nestled up the uneven cave it was built into. The most interesting people

were to be found there. It only brought the mystery of the hidden library more to light. That somehow the existence of Daguerreo hadn't made it into the hushed whispers on the streets of populous cities. It was a silent haven for a few select people of Gaia. Vivi had found many tomes he had sought after about old ways of alchemy and magic. Vivi wrote that Mikoto had gotten herself lost and when he found her, she was thumbing through an original copy of one of Lord Avon's plays. She was excited by the story. Vivi had brought it home for her. He also found ancient and rare books in Treno and Lindblum from men who could not grasp the concept of old-age magic. Vivi, however, had become a master through learning to understand himself and accept his origin. He noted that Mikoto preferred to fly instead of take a ship. The sea made her sick, which saddened her because she was amazed by its mass and the way it ebbed and flowed. By sheer luck a crate of old possessions washed up along the shore on the Outer Continent, which was retrieved by the dwarves of Conde Petie. They reported to a Black Mage delivering produce that there were some books that were damaged, but probably still useful for Vivi. On the journey to collect them, Mikoto discovered a new passion: botany. She had always been so enticed by the

forests that surrounded the village, tracing her fingers along the grooves of twisty roots. But on the trek to Conde Petie, Mikoto discovered one lone pink flower, standing proud amongst the brown and dull desert scape. Vivi wrote that she went on to collect all types of flowers and foliage, drying and pressing them, and taking note of the texture of their petals. Apparently, she had even taken up drawing. Zidane marveled at the growth of Mikoto throughout Vivi's musings about daily life. He could tell Vivi cared a great deal about the Genomes who now shared his home. One warm summer evening, Vivi wrote of a "Naming Ceremony" where all the Genomes proudly declared what they wanted to be called. He noted how their display of emotion walked hand in hand with their newfound identities on Gaia. Zidane clung to every word, as if to hold onto the memories he shared with Vivi just a little longer. He could almost sigh as he continued through the entries. Vivi had done so well. Zidane could only think of his own shortcomings, unable to support everyone like he desired.

"Zidane, good morning," He was startled from the passage and nearly swallowed a raspberry whole as he looked up and saw Garnet. She was dressed in a cream white sweater tucked into a warm looking

velvet skirt. Her hair had been braided in a fishtail that rest easy on her shoulder. “I didn’t expect to see you here this morning.”

He had lost track of time. Typically, Zidane gobbled his breakfast down and disappeared long before Garnet showed up. That morning, however, his spirits were feeling higher as he indulged in Vivi’s writing and took his meal slow. He grinned as Garnet seated herself across from him. The maids promptly brought her coffee and orange juice, rushing off to find her plate of breakfast. “I’m reading Vivi’s journal,” Zidane told her. “Listen to this. ‘The moon was full that night, which seemed fitting for the gathering we had created. One by one, around the bonfire, each Genome proudly declared what they’d like to be known as. The old, tired names, born out of necessity grew exciting. Elsbeth, Theodore, Isabella. It seemed with each proclamation, they sunk into their newfound life. One of which they didn’t know they craved. I watched them all intently. They were living proof that all things could be taught. That emotion was integral to us and that we were allowed, and justified, to feel however we wanted to. When we reached Mikoto, she was quiet for a moment. And then she said her own name. I marveled at that. Each

Genome had processed things on their own accord and had learned to make their own decisions. It was inspiring and I think I learned a lot from that night in the warmth of the fire.’”

A grand breakfast, much more intricate than Zidane’s, was delivered to the Queen. She smiled, though hints of sadness came through. She was glad Zidane was talking to her. He’d said more to her in that moment than she’d heard in the three days since Astrid’s burial. Garnet had been gravely concerned for Zidane as he wandered about the castle with no agenda and no drive. He avoided everyone. Garnet was glad Steiner had shared that journal with him. She hoped Zidane was visiting the best parts of himself in the texts. “Vivi always had it in him,” Garnet replied quietly as she spread her linen napkin across her lap. “Whether he thought he did or not. He had such a positive affect on everyone. We were lucky to have known him, Zidane.”

Zidane pressed the journal into the table and sighed, putting his elbows to the surface. “What was he like after you all came back? What happened?”

Garnet hated revisiting those first three weeks after their return from the Iifa Tree. She nearly got goosebumps as she recalled her short hair skimming

against the nape of her neck. She had felt lower than low during that period. Each passing day, where she and all her friends shared the same look, was devastating. By the end of nearly a month, everyone had to go their separate ways and find a mean to cope with the fact he should have returned by that point. Garnet licked her lips as she was brought back to the large and glistening dining hall. Zidane's blue eyes were looking at her almost earnestly. "Everyone stayed here at the castle for the first few weeks after leaving you behind," Garnet answered as she cut her eggs apart. The golden yolk spilled across the plate, like her own heart a year ago. "We held out hope you would return to us. Vivi was quiet, as he normally was. He spent a lot of time with Steiner. And after a week, he was drawn, constantly, towards the library. I never disturbed him. I... I didn't approach anyone. I waited for them to approach me. I suppose Vivi spent that month in waiting, like the rest of us, but also deciding what he would do with himself."

Zidane nodded, his eyes falling back towards Vivi's familiar handwriting. Sharp T's and heavily dotted I's. "I'm sorry I let you all down."

Garnet looked up from her breakfast. "You did no such thing. Zidane, you were in a coma for three

months.”

Briefly, Zidane recalled his time with Morrid. He never did send the old man coffee. He pursed his lips. “I think I know what I want to do.”

“What’s that?”

Zidane picked the journal up and for a moment, looked longingly over the text that Vivi had so dutifully written. His friend had done so much. He hoped Vivi realized his impact on the world. “I should go to Black Mage Village and be with Mikoto and the Genomes. I should help Steiner with continuing Vivi’s research. Maybe give back a little to the Genomes.”

Garnet couldn’t help the wilt in her heart. But she also couldn’t deny how important it would be for him, for his identity. Garnet didn’t know if she could bear to watch him leave again, though. She remained quiet, her heart almost breaking inside her chest. Her fingers curled tightly around her silverware. Finally, she looked to him. “You have to do what’s best for you, Zidane. And if it’s that, I will support you.”

His coffee mug hovered inches from his lips. Across the table, she seemed so composed, but he knew he was only hurting her. He was hurting



himself, too, in a way. Zidane could envision himself a year ago, day dreaming of having a comfortable and quiet breakfast with Garnet. But now, he only found himself antsy. He didn't even bother to drink his coffee, setting it back to the table. "Dagger... I..."

"You really don't have to explain yourself," Garnet said. "You *have* to do what's best for you, Zidane."

He was quiet for a beat. She was so trained to leave words left unsaid. Sometimes he wished she would unleash her frustration, her anger, and her sorrow upon him. But he knew Garnet was too sweet to do such a thing. She deserved the chance, though. He pressed his palm into the table, sliding it towards her. "Just tell me what's on your mind, Dagger." She looked at him intently before she went back to daintily cutting her sausage links apart. "Dagger, come on. You don't like what I'm saying. Maybe I don't either."

"And why would you say something like that?" Garnet asked, furrowing her brow. "If only you could see your own face, Zidane. You're inspired. You have something you want to do. And it sounds like a noble cause, especially in the name of Vivi."

And helping those who were only caught in our crossfires... there's no one better suited for the job than you."

Zidane licked his lips and they shared a stare. "It won't be forever, Dagger. And it's not like I'm disappearing again."

Garnet clenched every muscle in her body. "Do you promise to come visit me?"

"Of course," Zidane nodded. "An ocean separating us is nothing. I would still visit even if we were world's apart."

"You'll come for my birthday?"

"Hell, I'll act in that show until you get sick and tired of seeing it."

"Will you come... for my wedding?"

Zidane pressed his back against the rigid chair. "Did you decide...?"

"No," Garnet shook her head. "I was just wondering."

"I'll be there for you whenever you need me, Dagger. I'm just a messenger away," He folded Vivi's journal shut and downed the rest of his coffee.

“I’m going to see Steiner and talk to him. I’ll... I’ll see you later. Maybe for lunch?”

Garnet smiled in a somewhat watery way. “Sure. For lunch.”

Zidane stood and hurriedly left the dining hall, as if all his inner anguish, all the rumination and culminations of fear, anxiety, and betrayal were going to manifest and choke him, dragging him away to the personal hell he felt he deserved. He pressed through the door, a sweat forming on the nape of his neck despite the winter air seeping through the window panes.

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Beatrix heard a knock on the door and craned her neck from where she was pulling the tea kettle down from the cabinet. “It’s open!” She called. After a moment, someone hustled in and quickly shut the winter out. The snow flurries were caking up against the small kitchen window. Zidane came around the corner, setting a red journal down on the counter. He frisked the snowflakes from his dark hair and shrugged from his coat. Beatrix began pouring water into the kettle.

“Hey, Beatrix,” Zidane said, letting out a huff after hanging his coat up. “Is Steiner here?”

“No,” Beatrix replied, not even looking up. “He’s on patrol. The Burmecian Volunteers need some sleep.”

“Oh...” Zidane watched as she carried the kettle to the stove, lighting the pilot. He firmly held the book in his hand. “Can I stay until he gets back?”

Beatrix paused and turned from the stove, seeming to inspect the fractured young man head to toe. He was a mess, she wanted to frankly declare. But looking back at the last year of their lives, nobody had been true to themselves. In the aftermath of attaining prevailing peace, everyone seemed to have lost a bit of their own character. She knew she had, too. And altogether in one dark-minded chamber, they scrambled about trying to find it, begging the others to not get involved no matter how many times they bonked their heads against one another. They had forgotten the most important lesson, it seemed. They had had to rely on each other and lean together to get what they wanted. But now, everyone only wanted to lick their wounds in privacy, certain nobody could heal the ultimate damage. They all saw the pattern, too, but

nobody spoke up. Everyone refused to identify with it.

“Is that... Vivi’s journal?” She asked, quietly. Zidane glanced to it and offered her a nod. “Go ahead, take a seat here in the kitchen. I’ll make us tea.”

“Oh, I’m not really a tea drinker,” Zidane told her, brushing by to seat himself.

“You know, I never was, either, until about a year ago,” Beatrix said, pulling two tea cups from the cupboard. “But there’s something about tea that’s so knowing. The way it just soothes the body and mind. It helps me think more clearly. More objectively, I suppose.”

“I dunno,” Zidane shrugged, leaning against the wall. The wind outside had picked up and beyond the hedges, Alexandria was becoming a winter wonderland. “I figured it’s just what royals drink when having conversation in case topics don’t come up.”

Beatrix grinned. There were brief moments when the old Zidane seemed to shine through. It was promising. She arranged a small dish of buttered crackers and chocolate wafers. She set it on the table

and seated herself across from Zidane, resting her hand on her swollen belly. “So, did Vivi’s journal inspire you as much as it did Steiner?”

Zidane lifted his blue eyes from looking at the little treats. “Well, yeah,” Zidane shrugged and nodded. “I feel like I’ve learned so much more about him. It’s amazing the words that go left unsaid that trickle across a page... it’s a whole new Vivi I wish I had known. And Mikoto... she has a good head on her shoulders.”

“What has Vivi inspired you to do?”

“I want to go to the Black Mage Village. Live amongst the Genomes. I can help Steiner with the alchemy research and...” He was sheepish for a moment. “I could help the Genomes. I could never replace Vivi as their mentor or tutor but maybe we can all learn together how to live on this planet and take advantage of it the best we can.”

Beatrix stared at him a beat, reaching for a butter cracker. She couldn’t decide if it was what he genuinely wanted or if he was only running away from what he feared. She broke the cracker in half, lowering her chin. “What about Her Majesty?”

He practically deflated on being asked the question and looked to the snow for an answer. His blue eyes darted everywhere before he let out a sigh. "Have you ever loved someone and been scared by it?"

"I'm pregnant with Steiner's child, does that answer your question?" Beatrix cocked an eyebrow up as she bit into the cracker. "Why would you be frightened to love Her Majesty? You've been drooling over her since day one and *now* you're scared that she reciprocates?"

"It's not like that," Zidane sighed, pressing his elbows to the table and cradling his head in his palms. "I'm scared of hurting her, Beatrix. I've made a lot of mistakes with everyone. When I thought I was protecting her, I was only putting her into harms way. She could have been killed and it would have been all my fault. I realize now that I create the chaos. Whether I choose to or not."

"You're only hurting her more by leaving," Beatrix told him.

Zidane shook his head. "It's better for her this way. She can have a chance at normalcy."

The tea kettle shrieked in the next moment and Beatrix hauled herself to her feet with a sore back. “I think you should take the winter months to think on it, Zidane. I don’t think you should be so decided in your ways.” Zidane sighed again and turned his head out the window. Frustration riveted against his bones and he wished just once someone wouldn’t look to him with eyes of misgiving. He knew what he was doing, he wanted to argue. Nobody could understand but himself. Explaining was useless, he’d sorely come to realize. It felt like no one was listening to him.

In the next moment, however, he was startled to his feet at the sound of shattering tea cups. He turned to see Beatrix gripping the edge of the counter, her face contorted in pain. The amber liquid sprawled across the tile and he looked at her intently, reaching forward. “What’s wrong?! Are you alright?” Her cheeks reddened and she squeezed her eyes tightly shut as she exhaled unevenly.

“Zidane... I... I think the baby is coming...!”

“*Now?*”

“Yes, now!” She bellowed, falling against the counter and holding her hands to her stomach.



“I thought you weren’t due for another few weeks!” Zidane came to her side now, supporting her when he saw her legs wanting to buckle. ‘What do we do!?’ His mind and heart rate suddenly accelerated as she fell against him, letting out a yelp of pain. “Come on, we have to get you to the infirmary.” He began ushering her into the walkway, wrangling her coat down and nearly knocking the hanger over. Another wave of pain wracked the General’s body and she shook her head almost violently.

“No, I... I can’t walk that far...!” Her voice was pinched and raspy. “It’s too many stairs, Zidane.”

He turned to her, lamely holding her coat in his hands. She was right. It was nearly five flights of stairs to climb. Carelessly, Zidane dropped the coat on the ground and directed her into the living room. “Okay, well...” He raked his hands through his disheveled hair and winced when she let out another cry of pain as she seated herself on the couch. “You’re gonna have to wait here while I go get help.” Her red and sweaty face looked to him with a fear he didn’t know Beatrix was even capable of feeling. She grabbed his wrist.

“No, you can’t just leave me here!” She wheezed.

“But Beatrix—”

“Steiner should be back soon...” Beatrix told him, eying the clock on the mantle as she tried to control her breaths. “It’s almost lunch time...”

Zidane grabbed pillows and stuffed them behind her to support her back. Beatrix laid down and let out another howl of pain, her body contorting with each wrack. Zidane knelt beside her feeling powerless and quite uninformed. He had no idea what to do with a woman in labor. Tears formed in the pits of her eyes as she again went through a round of trying to catch her breath. In a beat, Zidane reached forward and held her hand. “Deep breaths, Beatrix. Inhale deeper!”

“I’m trying!” She cried out, shaking her head. “I want this thing *out of me!*”

“Hey, hey,” Zidane shook his head, pushing her sticky hair from the frame of her face. “It’s not a thing, don’t call it that!”

Beatrix took in a deep breath, closing her eyes as the hot tears streaked down her red face. “Fine,” She clenched her teeth together. “Valora.”

Zidane grinned lightly. “You two hopin’ for a girl?”

“It’s the only name we’ve thought of,” Beatrix said, trying to focus on talking. “Hopefully it is so we don’t have to think too long.”

Zidane glanced towards the clock. Suddenly, though, it felt like his hand was snapping as Beatrix faced another contraction. His jaw tightened as he endured the pain right alongside Beatrix. She let out a gasp as she emerged from the pain once more. “Deep breath, deep breaths!” He tried to coach. ‘Come on, Steiner, dammit!’ Zidane shook his head. Beatrix tilted her head back as if she was looking down a tunnel that never ended. Zidane pursed his lips. “It’ll be worth it, Beatrix. I promise.”

“What do you know about having a child?” She asked, rather sharply.

“As soon as you hold Valora, I think everything will just change,” Zidane told her. “Just imagine seeing Steiner hold her. He might be a dolt, but there’s nothing stopping him from being a fantastic father.”

He managed to get a little smile out of her, but it subsided quickly with another wave of pain. “Damn it, damn it, damn it!” She screamed. Beatrix let out a long sigh, the fabric of the couch curling beneath her strangled hand. “I never wanted this, Zidane. Part of

me still doesn't think I do, but I have no choice now."

"You're doing the hard part," Zidane nodded. "But I think somewhere in there... you do want this, Beatrix. I think you're talking from a world of pain. But once it's over, it won't be that bad. Give yourself a chance. Give your family a chance!"

"I can't even think about that right now, Zidane!" She shouted. "All I know is right now, I want this baby out of me, and I will *never* make this mistake again."

"Valora's not a mistake."

"Shut up, I'm having another contraction!"

Zidane bit down so hard on his tongue, he tasted copper. "You can't stay like this for long, Beatrix. I have to go get someone who knows what they're doing!" He tried to untangle his hand from hers, but she simply wouldn't let go. "Beatrix, c'mon!"

"If you leave me alone," She wheezed, looking to him intensely. "I will have you *beheaded*."

"Well, there's the Beatrix we all know and love," Zidane deadpanned.

In the next moment, the front door opened and the sound of the whistling wind could be heard. Zidane almost thanked the gods out loud. “Beatrix?” Steiner’s confused voice called out as the door thunked shut. “Your coats on the ground!”

“We got bigger problems, Rusty!” Zidane shouted. The perplexed Captain appeared in the living room, but his furrowed brow unknit and his face was immediately drowned in utter horror. “The baby is trying to come out!”

“Now?” Steiner bellowed, a panic rising up in him.

“Yes, now!” Zidane and Beatrix howled in unison.

Steiner sprung towards the couch. “What... what do we do?!”

“I’ll tell you what we do,” Zidane finally freed his throbbing hand from Beatrix’s grip. “You take her legs, I’ll take her arms. We’re carrying her to the infirmary!”

“Okay,” Steiner said, his voice rattling in fear. The man was shaking in his boots as he linked his arms around Beatrix’s thighs. Zidane carefully hooked through Beatrix’s arms and together they

lifted her. The General, however, screamed shrilly in pain. “We can’t, Zidane! We’re hurting her!”

Zidane looked to him through his bangs, his entire body tense. “Well, what do you suggest? Give birth here and then go furniture shopping?”

“You idiots,” Beatrix sneered sharply despite her eyes being misty with frustrated tears. “I’m in pain either way! Make up your minds!”

“I vote we carry her,” Zidane said, again pulling his arms under hers. “Come on, Steiner, the nurses and doctor’s will know exactly what to do.”

“Alright, alright...” Steiner replied, dismayed as he watched Beatrix’s face contort in knotted pain. Together, they lifted Beatrix again and she let out a raspy sigh. The two men’s boots crunched furiously through the snow as they hurried through the winding garden towards the warm protection of the castle. Beatrix almost welcomed the blistering wind as, moments ago, it felt like an inferno had been lit inside of her. Each bob of their steps felt like a dagger twisting in Beatrix’s intestines. She had been stabbed, she had lost her damn eye, and yet the pain of childbirth was unlike any type of pain she was familiar with. Her red face looked towards the overcast sky above her, snowflakes falling through

her thick hair. Would it be worth it? She did know what to expect on the other side. The pressure welling up inside her body wasn't a welcoming sign.

"Kohel!" Zidane shouted as they emerged into the grand front foyer. The knight staggered into a salute. "Run ahead, tell the doctors and nurses we're coming!"

"Yes, Zeke!" He replied, racing up the stairs. Zidane pursed his lips for a moment before shaking his head, focusing on keeping Beatrix steady in his arms.

The uphill climb of the stairs was brutal. Zidane tried to backpedal as fast as he could, his calves burning with each movement. Another wave of pain came over Beatrix and her scream echoed up the vaulted ceilings, reaching for Zidane's sleeve and giving it a hard tug. The sound had alarmed many volunteers and soldiers on patrol who had still yet to shake the fear of a follow-up attack. Up the winding stairwell, Zidane and Steiner watched head after head peer over the balustrade.

"It's all good," Zidane panted, tilting his head back. "Just a lady in labor!"

“We’re almost there, Beatrix,” Steiner said, trying to stay composed. Beneath his hands, her legs wiggled as the pressure in her belly only grew worse.

“Run *faster!*” She demanded.

The agonizing screams had made it to Garnet’s private study. The Queen raced from the room, pumping her arms like her life depended on it. She tightly gripped the railing, swinging herself around to look down. There she saw the frazzled trio in their race against time. Quickly, Garnet barreled down the stairs, nearly tripping over her own feet. “Beatrix!” Garnet caught up to their side, grabbing hold of her hand. For a moment, she wished she hadn’t as she jogged beside them. Beatrix’s grip was monstrous and the young woman was certain a bone was going to snap. “How long has she been in labor?”

“I dunno,” Zidane was breathless, glancing over his shoulder as they turned sharply down a hallway. “Ten minutes?”

“Longer than that!” Beatrix huffed.

Together, they all flew through the infirmary doors, frightening a nurse who was arranging polished instruments. Hurriedly, she fanned them



over to lay Beatrix in a bed, who screamed as she was lowered. The room quickly fell into chaos as maids darted for towels and linens. The doctor on duty was lightening fast to wash his hands as a nurse raced to wrap an apron around him. More nurses pushed past Zidane, effectively shoving him from the scene, as they worked on situating Beatrix and readying her for an imminent delivery.

“If you’re not immediate family, we ask that you leave,” A nurse said, firmly pressing her hand to Zidane’s chest. “It gets much too crowded.”

Zidane didn’t want to stay, anyway. He offered Steiner a supportive nod. The Captain looked incredibly nervous. Zidane turned and promptly left the room, shutting away Beatrix’s cries. After a moment, Garnet came out the door behind him. Zidane paused and looked over his shoulder, pressing his hands into his pockets. Garnet hugged herself and they only shared a stare that went on a bit long. “How long have you known Beatrix was pregnant?”

Zidane shrugged, looking toward the wall length window at the end of the hallway. “Since before she was even showing.”

Garnet shook her head and sighed. “Where have I been the last eight months?” She tilted her head back, clutching the collar of her sweater. “How could I have not known? Or even noticed her absence?”

Zidane turned to her, sheepishly shuffling his boots against the carpet. “I guess I could ask myself the same question.”

Her dark eyes fell across him and he held his breath for a beat. “What now?” She asked softly, her pink lips barely moving.

Zidane shrugged and wandered to the wall. He pressed his shoulders to the chilly marble and slid down, stretching his legs out in front of him. The doors across the hallway only offered muted cries of agony. “We wait, I suppose.”

Garnet folded her hands behind her back, looking up at the ornate carvings she had known her whole life. A moment later, Garnet seated herself on the ground beside Zidane, their shoulders touching, their voices silent, as they stared in anticipation at the infirmary doors.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

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### Chapter Thirty-Two

“Your Majesty...” Came a whisper amongst the chirping cicadas that now echoed down the tall hallways. “Zidane...” There was silence for a moment before Zidane’s eyes fluttered. The hallway was dark now and a full moon bled through the inky sky beyond the window. It was much colder as a few candles had withered away, anxiously waiting to be re-lit the next morning by the first shift of maids. The smell of lilac and potpourri wafted past Zidane and he realized Garnet’s head rested on his shoulder. They must have fallen asleep. In front of him knelt Steiner, who seemed tired but in good spirits. Groggily, Zidane rubbed at his eyes as Garnet came to, yawning and stretching her legs out. Immediately, though, the Queen perked up.

“The baby—”

“Come in. Meet our child,” Steiner stood and extended a hand out to Garnet. “Beatrix was in labor for nine hours, but she did wonderfully. Both mother and baby are healthy.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Garnet sighed as Steiner opened the door.

The infirmary was calm and quiet. Beatrix was at the far end, beneath the wall-length windows with the full icy moon visible above her. Candles surrounded her bed as she cradled a small child wrapped in white linens. Beatrix’s thick chestnut hair was coiled into a bun on the nape of her neck. Even with the sound of approaching feet, she didn’t tear her eyes away from the baby. The baby’s complexion was rosy and pale, like Beatrix’s. There were wispy locks of dark hair on its head, closely matching Steiner’s color. The child slept soundly, cradled closely to her chest. She still couldn’t quite believe it. A new life was in her hands, tangible and real. All the months of anticipation, utter anxiety, led to a moment of surrealism for the General. She had done it, despite the countless hours of believing she couldn’t. She still didn’t know what she was feeling, but she could not stop staring at the child. A mixture of her and Steiner. The creation of life was such a mystery. Who would this child be? Where would they find their place on this planet? Steiner’s hand gently grazed her arm and she looked up now to see the beaming faces of Zidane and Garnet. Beatrix couldn’t stop her eyes from growing misty. In front

of her stood the support team she never thought she needed. Never in her life had she considered leaning on anybody for support. She prided herself on being the only thing to keep her feet glued to the ground. But she realized now, those three were her anchors.

“Thank you,” Beatrix whispered, looking to Zidane.

“Looks like Valora made it out alright,” Zidane said.

Beatrix looked to Steiner, grinning slightly. “Actually... it’s a boy.”

Garnet gingerly seated herself on the bed, leaning forward to peer into the bundle of rumpled linens. “He’s beautiful, Beatrix.”

The baby wiggled in the blankets, their hands breaking free to grab at Beatrix. But still, he remained asleep. “Look at those hands,” Steiner was so full of pride. “He’ll be holding a sword before he’s even walking!”

“Looks like there’s a lot of child-proofing to be done,” Zidane deadpanned from the end of the bed. He could only imagine the tormented screams of Steiner as he tried to wrangle a sword from a toddlers hands.

“Who knows what he will be,” Beatrix replied, tenderly running her fingers along his locks that were as soft as downy on a duckling. “Perhaps he won’t ever be interested in picking up a sword. Maybe instead it will be a lute... or a paint brush. He can be anybody in this world.”

“And I’ll love him no matter what,” Steiner’s grin was from ear to ear. “I’ll be able to say ‘that’s my boy!’ in any instance.”

“What will you call him?” Garnet asked, placing her hands in her lap.

Beatrix was quiet, her brow furrowed as she looked over the baby. His little button nose matched that of Steiner’s. His round cheeks belonged to her. Together, the couple had made themselves known through all of his features. Would his hair be straight like Steiner’s or have a friendly curl to it like Beatrix’s? Would he prefer historical literature or high fantasy novels? Would he be a picky, defined eater or gobble everything up that didn’t eat him first? There were so many questions to who he would be. Beatrix was almost overwhelmed in the moment to select a name that would be suiting for him. But she looked to Steiner, who also seemed

anxious to choose something. She was sure his mind was doing loops like her own.

“I think I’d like to call him Addam,” Beatrix finally declared out loud. “To bear a resemblance to his father’s name, who I have no doubt has inherited his large, kind soul.”

“Addam Steiner,” Zidane said, smiling now. “It’s got a good ring to it. A refreshing version of Adelbert.”

Steiner’s lips were trembling now as he looked at Beatrix. Though he knew she was exhausted, maybe even highly anxious, it did nothing to detract from the utter beauty she was bathed in the winter moons light. He was looking at all his pride formed before him. After all that they’d been through for the past decade, Steiner never envisioned it ending up here. He remembered all her short remarks and hair flips. As she remembered him clumsily trying to keep up with her. They seemed like the biggest mismatch in the world to coincide in the castles protection. But now, their unity started a new chapter in Alexandrian history. In war history and world history. That winter night, the fearsome Rose General and Uncoordinated Captain brought a new life into the world. Addam Steiner. Would he be a

scholar? A local leader? An engineer? The pages that had yet to be written would be highly anticipated for years to come.

“It would be an honor...” Steiner’s voice faltered as tears now streaked his cheeks. He rubbed furiously at his face, shaking his head. He cleared his throat. “I promised myself I wasn’t going to cry.”

“It’s alright,” Zidane crossed his arms over his chest. “Soon enough Addam will be doing all the crying for you.”

Steiner looked to Zidane, smiling with his wet eyes, before he embraced Beatrix, tenderly kissing his son’s forehead.

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### *Three Months Later*

The vibrancy of the Alexandrian Castle garden was unmatched that beautiful spring night. The gardeners had worked tirelessly throughout winter and traveled great lengths for trimmings, soil, and seeds to create newly refreshed beds. The people of Alexandria flocked through its windy aisles and mingled on the large plazas, standing where just months before, it had been a ground of destruction,



mayhem, and death. Jaunty violin strings filled the air, along with laughter and the clinking of champagne flutes. It was the Queen's eighteen birthday. Tantalus had just completed another beloved rendition of *I Want to Be Your Canary* and this time, Garnet had watched comfortably from her balcony as Blank and Zidane fluidly ran through the sword fight, bringing a new energy to the stage that the people had missed the year before. To her Aunt Hilda's delight, Garnet dressed in a satin emerald dress sporting long fitting sleeves and embellished with gold embroideries along the hems and torso. Her fishtail braid laid dainty on her slender shoulders as she appeared before the crowd that had amassed for her. As she stood at the top of the stairs and looked over the joyous crowd, she couldn't help but fold her hands together and take a deep breath. What a year it had been. In three-hundred sixty-five days, things had changed so much. Some for the better. Some for the worst.

The Knights of Pluto and Squad Beatrix had been slowly recuperating as patriotic young people flooded applications in to renew the Alexandrian Castle in the wake of undeserved catastrophes. Beyond the hedges, in the darkness where no guest would linger, were scaffolds, piles of brick, and logs

of timber. The soldier barracks were being restored with plaques to be placed on the porch commemorating the soldiers who had given their life to save the throne. Beatrix and Steiner were also adding an additional room to their quarters for the growing young Addam, who at three months old, was quite the ladies man with large dashing brown eyes and curly chestnut hair. But the greens, reds, oranges, and yellows of the garden are what stuck out the most to the young Queen that night. Months before, it had only been soiled and charred sticks with ashy clumps of rose petals. It seemed things were righting themselves despite it feeling like the world had been turned upside down.

Zidane still had it set in his heart to go to Black Mage Village. He spent the winter months exchanging letters with Mikoto and grew emotional when a letter arrived, calling him her big brother, whom she desperately loved and looked up to. Garnet knew it was important for him to go. To honor Vivi and also to find the parts of himself that were still missing. She was certain seeing the Genomes growing into natural people would be good for him. To remind him Garland hadn't succeeded in his visions of puppets. To drive home the fact that his entire purpose in life was not to be a

connoisseur of misery and sorrow. Zidane was his own person and neither Garland or Kuja could ever change that or take it away from him. She'd miss him sorely. As Garnet watched him on stage, she thought of how she missed him already.

She pushed it all from her mind in that moment, however, and garnered up her smile. Garnet descended the stairs as the crowd returned to jubulations of the party. Decadent platters of fish, pastries, and fine meats were calling the names of many patrons. Others danced their hearts out. The champagne, whiskey, and pale ales flowed endlessly. Garnet was offered her own champagne flute as she reached the end of the stairs and she walked soundlessly amongst the crowds of people who wished her a happy birthday and thanked her for her work. As she watched her citizens have a well deserved night of fun, it felt as if it wasn't even her own party. It was a celebration of Alexandria. One that had been long-coming, emerging through the gloom that had clouded her mind for months before. Garnet took a sip of her champagne. Even if Zidane left again, all felt right in her soul knowing he was on the same planet as her, looking to the same sky. And maybe one day, her heart wished, he would

return to her and recognize everything he was capable of.

“Darling, you look *smashing!*” Hilda appeared from no where, dressed in a lavish blue dress, and whirling a glass of red wine around rather carelessly. “Oh, I love this dress so much!”

“Thank you,” Garnet grinned as Hilda felt her hand along the textured satin on the sleeve. “A local seamstress made it for me.”

“It’s much better than the white ivy dress,” Hilda nodded. ‘You pull it off wonderfully, darling, but there’s nothing wrong with shaking it up! It’s only suiting you appear before your people so stunningly transformed and beautiful. After everything that’s happened, this dress has really made a statement for you.’ Hilda took a healthy drink of her wine and glanced around. “Eighteen years old! Darling, your mother was married at sixteen, what will you do now that the dust has settled?”

“I don’t know,” Garnet shook her head, glancing around at the shuffling people. “Wait for a moment that feels right to me, I suppose.”

Hilda grabbed Garnet’s hand tenderly. “Maybe this isn’t the right thing to say at this moment, but

it's better to say and not regret keeping silent later on. Liam is here, darling. And I think after so many months, it would be good to reconnect again. You're both older and wiser now, he's freshly twenty, and continuing to do marvelous work on the airships. He won't say it himself, but I'm certain he'd love to see you. What do you say, darling?"

The Queen wasn't sure what to say at all. When she heard his name, she didn't even know what she felt. Garnet knew Liam's intentions were true, but his execution was brutally dishonest to her. Maybe things could have naturally grown, but all she could recall were the blinding headaches and blurs of hours as her mind grappled with what she had ingested. Love made people do stupid things, she reminded herself. Zidane had leapt from a balcony for her. But still, that was a far cry from slipping a potion into someones tea. Garnet knew Liam cared for her, though. He had made things so complicated for her, however. While her mind tried to talk logic, her heart pumped the brakes incessantly. Even after all was said and done, Garnet still loved Zidane. And that wouldn't be fair for Liam. In her world, Liam couldn't even compete with Zidane.

"I'm glad to hear he's been well," Garnet said, emerging from her thoughts. "If I see him, our

exchange will be cordial and friendly, as usual.”

“You know, darling, I’ve been thinking about what you said Liam had done to win your affection,” Hilda gave her hand a good squeeze. “While, ultimately, that is a wrong way to go about it, think of it from Liam’s perspective. He must only see himself as a lowly engineer who was so lucky to catch the eye of a beautiful queen such as yourself. He was only trying to be there for you.”

“Excuse me, I’d like to ask the queen for a dance.”

Garnet almost sighed in relief when she saw Zidane, still in costume from the play, appear beside them. It was almost as if he always knew when Garnet was in turmoil. Lady Hilda was surprised by his sudden presence and her ruby lips were open for just a moment before she composed herself. “Yes, of course. It is her birthday, after all. I am not one to stand in the way of fun.” Garnet set her glass on the table beside her and gingerly took Zidane’s hand, where he led her to the outskirts of the dance floor. The frilly bib of his costume grazed her neck, giving her goosebumps. He pressed his hands to her waist and she ran her hands along his broad shoulders

before they started bobbing about with the poised violin strings.

“How did you know?” Garnet asked as she looked to his clear and vibrant face. His blue eyes nearly glowed in the torchlight.

“I had a feeling,” He grinned, making her heart leap.

“So,” Garnet said as he swung her around. “When do you leave?”

“This Friday,” Zidane told her as they grazed the edge of a couple who had obviously had too much to drink. “I have a boat ordered in Burmecia.”

“I’m happy for you, Zidane,” Garnet replied, genuinely and tenderly. “You always strive to do so much good for this world when it doesn’t even deserve it.”

“It’s the people in this world that deserve it.”

Together, they spun around and Garnet found herself only staring at him. His clear complexion, his positively bright blue eyes, the smile that was always on his face. Garnet really didn’t know how he managed. He had hit his rock bottom before. So had she, multiple times. But still, he rose above his

own ashes and stood tall, an example to all, though he felt invisible to everyone. But he wasn't to Garnet. He was the monument in her life she would stare at, no matter how many times she passed by it. She pressed her fingers a bit tighter to him to make sure he was really there, that she wasn't dreaming any of this. It would be a while before she felt his touch again. Her eyes grew wet in that moment as she locked her fingers behind his neck. So many miles would be placed between them, but she knew her feelings for him wouldn't grow cold. They hadn't even when she thought realms divided them. The Queen was certain in that moment that he was the love of her life.

“I’m no good at goodbyes,” Garnet told him as the background around them fell away and only each other were to be seen and heard. ‘But I think this is a perfect moment to let you know how much you mean to me. To all of us. Everything you’ve done for me, I could never give back to you. But I wish everyday I could do half as much for you as you’ve done for me. Even in your silent and disguised ways, you were there for me. And maybe I don’t understand everything that has happened this past year, but I’m content with that in a way... because it was you behind everything. My guardian angel,



whose never left me alone or let me suffer a lurch by myself.’ The tears were gathered in her eyes now and Zidane could only focus on holding her closely as they swayed about the dance floor that they now ignored beneath the blossoming garden. “I can’t love anyone but you, Zidane. From the moment I met you, maybe I doubted myself or wouldn’t allow myself to give in, but it was always you. You protected me, you always tried to lighten the scene and make things easy for me even when I did not... I don’t deserve you and I know that now. But that will not stop me from loving you endlessly.”

She pressed her face to his frilly stage costume and Zidane wrapped his arms tightly around her. His heart panged in his chest, his mind binging back and forth asking himself if what he was doing was right. But deep inside, he knew it was the good choice. He had been so lost for a year. It was twelve months he’d never get back. And still, a light fog clouded his mind that he desperately wanted to clear. He couldn’t be King. At least, not at that time. Zidane loved Garnet with his entire being. More so than any tangible thing he’d had in his life. But he couldn’t shake the feeling that, at that moment, he was no good for her. She couldn’t be responsible for helping him pick up the pieces of himself he had left

scattered. Zidane's only desire was to return to her wholly, true to himself, with no regrets or questions. Feeling her slender body beneath his grasp only embedded that into his mind. He inhaled deeply the familiar scent of her hair as they now only swayed in each others arms.

"You know that's not true," Zidane said, fiercely, but quietly. "What does a back alley thief like myself do to deserve words like that from a Queen? I don't deserve you, Dagger. Not an ounce of you. Not a moment of your time. Everything I do, though, is for you. It will always be for you. I'm not leaving you to hurt you. I'm leaving you to find myself, so I can be the best person I can be for you. It's not forever. I promise you that. I'll come back. I swear on my own grave."

Garnet's fingers dug against his vest. "I hope you find the parts of you that you miss, Zidane."

He grinned against her onyx hair. "With your support, I couldn't miss them even if I were blind. I just hope you truly understand, Dagger. I have to do this for myself. You're not responsible for me. Not when you have an entire kingdom to look after."

"We could make it work," She squeaked from beneath his theatric bib.

Zidane shook his head, though, pressing his cheek against her forehead. “It wouldn’t be fair to you. You just have to let me do this and trust in me.”

“I trust you, Zidane,” Garnet exhaled unevenly as the tears streaked her cheeks. The violins filled her ears for a moment and she clutched him tightly. “Just promise me once more... you’ll come back.”

“I will,” He whispered, sending goosebumps down her spine. “That’s a promise I can truly keep this time.”

The string quartet finished their piece and, around them, the crowd was in thunderous applause, hoots, and hollers. But the two young adults only drew back to look at each other in the flickering orange flames of the night. He was a man of his word. And she was the keeper of all oaths. Tenderly, she brought her hand up to cup his cheek, grazing her thumb along his soft cheekbone. In a way, she still couldn’t believe it, even though it’d been months. He was here. He never gave up on her, even when she wanted to. She had nothing to offer but her support. But that was all he seemed to want.

“I love you,” She whispered amongst the chaos around them.

“I love you, too,” He said. It made her blood run faster through her veins.

With a thundering heart, she came forward and pressed her lips to his. He pushed back with a passionate intensity she had never known. Garnet had never kissed anyone before. But feeling his lips against hers seemed to seal something in her soul. In a way, it was forging his seat to the eventual throne. He didn't want it now, but one day he would be ready. Garnet knew it. And she would prepare her kingdom for the shock of his ascendance. The Alexandros Bloodline had been ceased by Astrid's actions. But together, they would carve something new and the kingdom would steadily rise from the dark past that had followed it. They would raise themselves above the clouds that cast their shadows. Just as Zidane had done for his friends, whether he wanted to take credit for it or not. Garnet was convinced he had saved her life. As their lips parted and she looked into those adoring cerulean blue eyes, she only knew he had another journey in front of himself. He would find his balance, though. And he would return to her one day. Their dearest memories would eventually forge into one unification and their voices would echo through history.

Together, they would become a melody of life itself.

*The End*

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